



## **TE ARAROA EXPLORATIONS**

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## The North - Section 1: Cape Reinga – Ahipara

### #1 The Departure

*Te Araroa takes its first steps - from New Zealand's most northerly lighthouse to Te Pahi Stream*



Cape Reinga lighthouse

I patted a buttress on that stout little stud of concrete, the Cape Reinga lighthouse, and moved off. It was just coming on light - time to go. We walked up the hill to the collection of huts at the top. We stopped at the beginning of the trail that leads away behind the loos, the post office, and the generator hut there. The sign said:

#### **Cape Reinga Coastal Walk**

End of Werahi Beach - 11½ hours

Twilight Beach - 31½ hours

Te Pahi Stream Rd - 8 hours

"It doesn't say," I said, "how many hours to Wellington."

"I guess you can send them a fax later," she said.

She made last minute adjustments to the camera bag around my waist, then the shoulder-straps of the pack, pulling the toggles tight. I double-checked the Leki sticks - the hiking sticks - strapped onto the side.

We kissed. It was a good kiss. Like last night in the tent had been good - we'd fronted the DOC rangers, and got one-off permission to camp out on the edge of the wahi tapu that cloaks this headland.

Why do people do long walks - the Bruce Trail in Canada, the Appalachian Trail in America, Britain's Pennine Way? Well, to sort themselves out. Score one. That kiss was good, because some of the stuff lately hadn't been. Or maybe they lost their job. Score two, though giving up that regular pay packet a while back was my own decision. Diagnosed with cancer? Score three. Eight months ago I had a melanoma cut out of my back. It's okay, but it makes you think. Then there's nature. Back at the Cape, there'd been the same clean vistas you get staring out the window of a Boeing 747: the edge of the land, cloud strata, light cracking the horizon. And closer in, that deep wound in the water as the Tasman and Pacific Oceans sluice into each other.

Big or small, nature is good to watch. I came down the track through wild hebe and scrubby manuka onto Werahi Beach. I saw my first *Spirula spirula* - the buoyancy chamber of a small squid that is the signature of a west coast beach. I watched the little clods of sand thrown forward by my boots. I saw one of the clods bowl a sandhopper. I watched the first windblown seaweed pod roll across my path - and then I left the beach and it got serious. I plugged over the base of Cape Maria van Diemen ankle deep in dry sand. The top of New Zealand is just bits of rock with a webbing of sand stretched between the bits, and that is a fair definition of the cape.

Under a noon sun I walked on along Twilight Beach then climbed to a cliff top track, its edges bulging with manuka in flower and hot summer smells, and alive with bees. I'd been walking five hours when the track suddenly twisted north and I could see, distant but distinct, the cluster of sheds at Cape Reinga. To walk back there, carrying a 23 kg pack that made you effectively three stone overweight, it was an exhausting thought. But the way ahead? It was no further than the next hill, the next brief hill-top stop to suck on the water bottle. And over that hill, at around 3 pm, came Ninety Mile Beach.

Add people to the list of long-tramp attractions. And something more - I belonged to a group that had just designed a foot trail route for the North Island - Cape Reinga-Wellington - and I was setting out to test it. Six months before I'd talked to a journalist friend, who'd asked what I was doing now that I was - unemployed. Did I want free-lance work?

"No - for the next three months," I said, "I've got a project."

"Oh God. Not the bloody shining path, or whatever it's called," she said.

"The name," I said stiffly, "is Te Araroa. I'll be going around the councils, DOC conservancies, Maori groups - anyone who might be able to help us design a track that's a viable through route for a tramper."

I went around to see Ray Sugar later that day. Ray is someone I trust. He'd been struck by multiple sclerosis a year before. It was, for the moment at least, progressive and he'd just had to accept - during a visit to Sydney - that a wheelchair was now his best method of covering distance.

"I have now found, Geoffrey," he said. "That my main eye contact as I jet around the world is with children in strollers. At Kingsford Smith Airport, for example I came face to face with such a child. His neck went rigid and his eyes popped out like saucers and he swivelled his face up to his mum and pointed and screamed - Baby! Baby! And then he went berserk. It was obvious that he'd just seen the baby from hell. That he'd had nightmares about someone like me, and then I'd come wheeling into view."

I told Ray about my conversation earlier that day with the journalist.

"Oh dear - the shining path - you'd better not let that get around," he said. "We all know, don't we, that there's a wee element of truth in that. You know when I was a teenager in my very idealistic years Geoffrey, I wrote an essay about a road people worked on that brought an entire society together."

"Yeah, so?" I said.

I told Ray of an idea I'd had in the bath the previous night. That when I'd designed a trail, I might walk it.

"A lot of it would not be in place," he said.

"A lot of it would be, because we'd tie in the main DOC and council tracks, but in parts it would not be, yep," I said.

"My suburban journeys," he said, "are a little like what you are planning to do. You may, in the very near future, fall into a ravine, whereas I have already tipped over backwards trying to get up a kerb, and hit my head. I suspect it will take a lot of cunning and planning to do what you want to do, and it takes a lot of cunning and planning to do what I do. But don't worry Geoffrey. If you get into trouble I will wheelchair in, throw you across my thighs and wheelchair out."

And then there was Sir Edmund Hillary. When our group revived the notion of a single long foot trail for New Zealand two years back, Ed agreed to be a patron. I took him along to a photo shoot, and briefed him on the concept.

"A lot of the trail is there right now," I said. "Ninety Mile Beach (which is really only 64 miles long) - that's 100 kilometres - done. Then we want to get from Ahipara on the west coast to Kerikeri on the east. There's four DOC forests in there. It's public land, it's crossable, and -"

"Whoa," said Hillary. "Coming down Ninety Mile Beach - where are the water stops?"

"The water stops?"

I stood on Scotts Point looking down on a beach that stretched forever and vanished into salty haze. Huge bare dunes back-stopped the beach, undulating down through smaller spinifex-



covered dunes to the beach flats. A strip of dry sand, a strip of wet sand, then the water. Calm water - the sweeps - the clear saucers of water that have lost all force and spread like liquid glass at the edge of the tide. Broken water - the whitewash tumbling shoreward in layers. Then the big guys, the breakers rolling in, and beyond them, out to sea, more to come: the ceaseless corrugated ocean. I was standing on Scotts Point, and I was wondering about those dead-white hillocks that shone amongst the dunes. But my mind had become a Hillary mind too. Water stops.

#### Ninety Mile Beach

Te Paki Stream was around five kilometres up the beach, and I camped there. In the morning I took an hour to pump six litres of water through the ceramic core of a Katadyn water filter. That included an extra 1.5 litre H2GO bottle I'd picked up on Twilight Beach. You couldn't rely on any one stream beyond Te Paki to be running and during a real dry you could tramp 40km without a chance to replenish. That was the warning I had, and I departed Te Paki stream next day with waterbottles fastened by cord to every loop of the pack, like the swaying, clinking man of oils and unguents in the film *The English Patient*. I rolled away from there as aqueous as a watertank.



## #2 Te Paki Stream to Pukekura Stream:

*On day two, the feet do the usual second-day thing - fall to bits - and a man with the strategic skills of Field Marshal Rommel tries to sabotage Te Araroa.*



**Motupia**

Ninety Mile Beach extends so far and is so much the same that any object that sticks out of that dust and water strip is visible for miles. An object as uninteresting as a plastic crate possesses nonetheless, for the long hours it takes to reach and identify it, cryptic power. Beyond Te Paki, on the high tide line, stands a 'T'. It appears huge, and its alphabetic form suggests a kind of magnificence, then it reveals itself, in the brief minutes as you actually draw level, as an upended wooden cable drum, hung with small mussels.

Motupia had lain in front of me ever since leaving Scotts Point, but without mystery. An island is just an island, though I wondered why this one, with its distinctive bird-skull shape and socket, had never found itself into any of the coffee table books. Motupia was still a distance off when I saw two vehicles with a string of trailers stop facing the island.

They were not the first vehicles I'd seen on the beach. The tourist buses, almost corny in their bright livery and script - Cape Runner, Sand Safari - use Ninety Mile Beach as a highway and had already splashed up Te Paki Stream when I was pumping water. But these ones - still spindly in the distance - were the first I'd seen stopped.

An hour passed and I was close enough to see the seaweed that lay in a dark roll buffeted by an incoming tide. A Maori gang was working like the clappers. One trailer was half in the tide, and three men with long-handled spatulas were throwing pink seaweed into the trailer with a speed that suggested a race against time. Another couple were working to a long trailer attached to a beaten-up yellow Toyota at the water's edge, and a third man stood on the trailer, swiftly distributing the load with a rake. A Pajero roared up the beach with two empty trailers in tow, slid to a halt, and an older man jumped out. I headed for him, and he saw me coming, but moved away from me, calling instructions to the water gang. The guy leveling the weed in the long trailer finished his task, and jumped down. I grabbed him. I had a map ready and knew no-one could refuse a tramper guidance.

"Hi man. Can you give me an idea which of these streams is running?"

He was young, Maori, with long blonded hair, tats, an earring. He looked harassed.

"This one." He pointed to Pukekura Stream just 10 kilometres up the line, and I marked it in pencil. His eyes kept flicking away like he shouldn't be standing around talking. "The others - maybe not, but you can

always follow them in and get water in the forest."

"Great." I gestured at his load. Seaweed eh?"

"Yeah," And he was gone. I walked on a kilometre, then headed up to dry sand, cooked up a packet soup and watched them. The pace of work didn't slacken. The two 4WDs belted up the beach with full trailers and returned with the empties 15 minutes later, kicking up spray, and the process continued until the dark roll of seaweed that had come in with the tide was gone. The beach was deserted again. Then a Landrover came down, pouring a greasy black exhaust, towing a double trailer and with some rake-like mechanism on the front to allow a one-man seaweed lifting operation. The Landy zeroed onto the patch that the Maori gang had worked. It stopped - you could just about see it sniffing the air. It turned round and went back up the beach. You could just about smell the disappointment. I waved, but no answering signal came back. The Ninety Mile Beachers took their seaweed gathering more seriously than anyone I'd ever seen before.

I was getting sharp tendon pain from my boots. On the second day in, I'd hoped to reach the Bluff, the only headland on Ninety Mile Beach, about a third of the way down. But I was far short of it, and hobbling. I changed to sandals and the tendon pain disappeared, but it took only a few more kilometres before the sandals had blistered every rub point. I treated the blisters with Second Skin, strapped the feet with Sleek, put on a pair of Thorlo socks to further distance sore flesh from the unforgiving sandal edges and kept walking. I was okay, but I already knew I wouldn't get to the Bluff that day.

"Want a ride?"

The ute had come out of the south in the late afternoon, and stopped alongside.

"You're going the wrong way."

"I dropped a board off the trailer - I'm just going to find it, then I'll be going back to the Bluff - hop in."

"I can't. I'm doing the beach on foot. I'm doing the length of the North Island on foot. No rides."

"What - for charity?"

"No - just walking. But you can tell me something. Your trailer. You gather seaweed right?"

"I don't do the seaweed. I'm a fisheries officer. Right, so you're coming or not? I've got to find that board and beat the tide back to the Bluff."

"Why?" I said, "do they gather seaweed?"

"It's not the seaweed," he said, "It's the mussels." Then he was gone.

I walked on up to Pukekura Stream and waited. I didn't want to know about the seaweed any more, I wanted to know about the mussels. And I was sick of walking. I watched the birds. When you're trudging into the featureless distance of the Ninety Mile, it's the dark surge marks of the tide, reaching in places right across the white sand, that are the fata morgana of the beach. They look like the stream that's marked on your map and you want fervently for them to be the stream that's marked on your map, but they never are.



The real fresh-water streams are always heralded by birds. A covey of small black-headed terns and two big Caspian Terns had ushered me into Te Paki. At Pukekura it was black-backed gulls, two pied stilts, shy birds with a cry as thin and red as their legs, and three black oyster catchers, busy with their stick-like orange beaks blind-tapping their way around the shallows.

Twenty minutes later the ute re-emerged from the afternoon haze, and I flagged it down.

"Okay," beamed the driver. "So sling that pack in the back - you want a ride."

"No, I want to know about the beach. I want to know what I'm walking through. I want the stories."

"You want someone who knows the beach? Warren Brown's your man. He's up at the bluff right now, fishing. He's Ngati Kuri. He was born in Te Hapua, went to school here, lives here, he knows about this place like no-one else. Hop in, I'll take you up."

On his particular patch of desert, this guy had the strategic skills of a Field Marshal Rommel.

"Look - " I introduced myself and said - "What's your name?"

"West Hill."

"West - I'd love to come up to the Bluff and talk to Warren Brown, but I can't. I've got to *walk the beach*."

"Your feet have to touch the sand the whole way right?"

"You've got it."

"Okay - sit on the trailer, hang your feet out the back and make sure they're scraping the beach all the way to the Bluff."

The tide was surging in, and it left little time to talk. But I wanted at least to know about the mussels.

"Mussel spat," said Hill. "It's in that weed, and they freight it at top speed down to the South Island mussel farms. It's big money - the rumour was one guy made \$80,000 in a month."



**Fisheries officer West Hill**

West Hill patrolled Ninety Mile Beach, checking the catches of the half-dozen commercial fishing vessels that put out from distant Ahipara, checking the paua divers that come out from Kaitaia, and the bag limits of the non-commercial surf-casters who set up anywhere along the beach. Or, he was turning his radar onto the big trawlers that came up from the south, checking that regulation nautical mile between them and high water mark.

"And we guard the toheroas. They're about half way down the beach. It's prohibited to take them, but everyone does, and we catch them. A \$500 fine. This beach - I love it. The way the trees come down to the edge of the dunes. The wild horses. They've been out today, I've seen their hoof-prints on the sand. Fishing - you can get snapper, kahawai, mullet ... And in February, there's the fishing contest. That's a big one - \$50,000 first prize, maybe 1000 anglers up here then, and you can win a vehicle as well."

He said goodbye, and I gave up for the day. The sky looked threatening and after I'd found a campsite upstream, I hammered extra lengths of wood around the tent. That night I awoke in total blackness. The rain, that had been pleasantly tack-tack-tacking on the fly when I went to sleep was belting against it now. The tent bucked and heaved, and the wind became more and more violent. I packed up my gear. The jerking tent floor knocked over the candle lantern - its flame enclosed against any contact with flammable material, but not entirely enclosed - and I had a brief moment of realising how easily, if this were a real cyclonic wind, and one made certain key mistakes, the thin fabric that keeps us safe might just rip away. I fell asleep later and when I checked in the morning, not a single tent-peg had been extracted or even loosened by the storm. Darkness perhaps exaggerates fear. Only the Leki sticks - stuck in the ground outside because of the damage their steel tips could do to the tent floor and now fallen over each other like exhausted children - gave any evidence of a rough night.

### #3 18 kilometres of windy desert

*The wild horses show themselves on the way to Hukatere, and a motor camp turns out to be a mirage*

The beach that day was moving. Up near the high-tide mark the dry sand was pluming ankle-deep across the beach like smoke. A 40-knot south-west wind whipped the ocean to whitecaps, and I leaned into it, but even on a sunny day I could feel the wind chill.

I put on an anorak, and that shadow the walked beside me, leaning forward with its rounded hood, big pack and hiking sticks protruding, was definitely, amidst that blizzard of sand racing by, an Antarctic image. I made the Bluff that morning, rested in the lee of the headland for an hour, then turned back into the headwind. I was now walking the long curve of sand that stretches some 70 kilometres down to Ahipara, but after a couple more hours I was sick of being staggered by the gusts, sick of the booming in the hood, and headed up into the dunes for a rest.

The dazzling white mounds that had caught my eye during the first hill-top survey of Ninety Mile Beach were old middens, many of them huge. Now a small bleached hillock stood just 40 metres in from where I rested out of the wind, and I went down for a look. A trail led past it and on through the toi-toi, mungimungi, and the lupins. Dried horse dung was piled here and there along the track - I'd come upon a wild horse trail, and it was headed the right direction.

I went back and got my pack. After one kilometre or so the trail turned and headed inland along a margin of the salt and wind-burned Aupouri Forest. Damn! I cast around and found minor trails, each studded with dried dung, but kept I kept losing them and having to make my own track between clumps of reed-like oi-oi grass, past cutty grass, and through the brittle lupins. Progress was slow, and I began making my way back to the beach. I topped a small dune. Below was a depression green with lupin. The herd was grazing there, and seven horse heads jerked up to stare at the intruder.

The horses stood absolutely still. I saw a foal, mares, and one big black stallion. I fumbled for the camera. Ninety Mile Beach has enough salt and sand to sink the delicate technology of all Japan, and so the Mavica FD7 digital was protected by a tightly fitted stuff bag with the draw-string pulled, and that bag was further enclosed by a waterproofed and zippered bum-bag I carried at my waist. For quick response photography, that was a nightmare. The horses, without panic but definitely intent on getting out of there, had begun to move. I was shedding the pack and levering the stuff bag out of the zippered case in a single motion. I was squeezing the camera out of the stuff bag, and switching it on in a second single motion. The thing spun out of my hands and \$1,400 worth of delicate technology hit the sand with a thud.

I picked it up. It was still registering images on the LCD screen, but an LCD screen is not like a viewfinder. You don't hold it up to your eye, but out in front of you to frame images, and now every bit of light from the glaring surround was reflecting off the screen and I could see nothing. I couldn't find the horses. I clicked wildly - and later, on the replay function, I would admire these first shots of tilted horse-less landscapes, and whirling horseless skies. I missed the shots, and the horses were gone, but the stallion moved back to see me off, and I finally got the photograph.



He wheeled and disappeared, but I crept up to the next crest, and poked the lens through the bushes. The herd had broken up but I zoomed in on them, then watched them regather in the distance, and head off in single file toward the forest.

That night I camped at the last stream before



the long waterless stretch to Hukatere, but my progress had been disappointing. My feet were sore, the wind had been ferocious, and I was carrying too much weight. The extra water I'd packed had been, in retrospect, unnecessary. Every stream after Te Paki had been running, but because I was unsure I'd burdened myself with an extra five or six kilos, the pack weight climbing to an unforgiving 27 or 28 kg. But the feet were feeling better next day and the wind had dropped. I broke camp and was back on the beach by 8 am, walking, walking, and by late afternoon I'd covered the 30-odd kilometres to Hukatere. At Hukatere I was looking forward to a meal of - well something special - baked beans? Buttered bread? A fried egg or two? I'd had nothing but dried pasta dropped into a pot of boiling water, and fruit cake, since leaving Reinga, but Hukatere I knew had a motorcamp and a superette.

At least I thought I knew that. I'd had a conversation with a mate who'd tramped Ninety Mile. He'd twisted his ankle at one point, and had described in detail resting up for two days at the Hukatere motor camp with its superette. I hadn't explored the detail of exactly where on the beachfront that camp was, simply looked at Hukatere on the map, right there, beachside without a doubt, and mentally filed it as a food and water stop.

But Hukatere was nothing more than a turnoff - a sand road headed inland.

There were clues that people had passed this way: the exit sign stuck in the beach had been punctuated - the 'l' carefully dotted, the full stop neatly in place - by someone with a 303.



The volcanic mound of Hukatere Hill also made the place distinct, but beyond that it was wild, woolly and in the middle of nowhere. And then I saw two women and their two Jack Russell terriers sunbathing on a dune.

Janet Snell and Ona Landman were from Whangarei but were house-sitting at Pukenui, a small town around 12 kilometres inland from the beach. Sure there was a motor camp, but that too was around 8 km in from the beach, on State Highway 1. I stared at them in disbelief realising in a slow sort of way that my ankle-twisted tramper friend must have hitched a ride up to the camp and forgotten to mention that detail. Otherwise, said the women, there was nothing on Ninety Mile Beach itself until Waipapakauri, another 12 kilometres south.

Janet and Ona had come down to gather tuatua and picnic. Their two dogs were called Fergie - the little Jack Russell had been an unnamed stropky new pup and red-headed to boot at about the time the bolshie redhead Sarah Fergusson took the British Royal family by storm ten years back - and Roxy.

The two women offered me a lift to the Hukatere camp, but even if I then hitchhiked back, and picked up the trail again at this turnoff, it seemed like a silly diversion for one can of baked beans.



Then they offered food. I followed Janet to the car, she opened the boot.

"There's not a lot left, I'm sorry."

With round eyes I was watching her casually throwing a cornucopia of delights into a plastic bag.

"Fruit? Mandarins - half an apple here. Bread? No butter I'm sorry. Crackers and cheese."

At that moment I felt an actual contraction of the saliva glands under my jaw. It's true what they say of long trails. That one of the primary effects is the kind of low-level ecstasy generated by holding in your hand, after days of tramping, something as mundane as - well - crackers and cheese.

Janet was a tramper with the Whangarei Tramping Club, so I volunteered the aims of the tramp I was doing, and showed both women the Te Araroa map I was carrying, a route marked in red all the way to Wellington.

"This is what the Walkway Commission is working on," said Janet.

"No," I said. "The commission folded up in 1989, the function of developing walkways fell to DOC, and they didn't have the money."

"Right - it's a very interesting concept. It's very good someone is carrying it on," said Janet.

"Someone has to," I said, and Ona who had been quiet throughout, studying the situation, said suddenly.

"You're on a mission."

"Oh hell no," I said. "I wouldn't put it like that."

"Yes you are," said Ona. "You're on a mission."

"It doesn't feel like a mission. I'm dirty, I practically drooled just now when Janet mentioned crackers and cheese, I've had tendon pain which feels different from blister pain - it feels serious - and I really don't know about Wellington."

"Oh no," said Janet. "You'll make it."

"Well okay," I said. "I take that as a kind of blessing."

#### #4 The Bid for Waipapakauri

*The Leki poles strut their stuff, but are overwhelmed by strange lights in the forest, sharks, and the deceptions of a Ninety Mile night.*



I walked on a distance from Hukatere, and stretched out on the beach to watch the sun go down. I drew the word mission in the sand beside me - it seemed such an unfamiliar word in the 90s, defined more by those reruns of the Blues Brothers trying to reform their band - and watched a sand hopper scabble up the side of, lose traction on, and finally fall away from, the giant crater of the O.

The sun went down, the moon came up. Seven planets slowly swam into position along what was, in that month of December, a once-in-a-century line-up either side of the moon. I had a simple idea. I'd been walking since 8 am, but I was well-fed, and well-watered, and didn't feel tired - I would walk to Waipapakauri through the night.

Better yet - I would hike to Waipapakauri using the Leki sticks. The Leki sticks came with their own story. Before leaving Auckland I'd shopped at Pack 'n' Pedal's Newmarket store. That store had generously allowed me a large discount on the tramping gear I needed. I already had boots and a tunnel tent, but otherwise, I bought the ranch. A new 85 litre Macpac - yes I'd have it, lighter and more waterproof than my old Fairydown. A new anorak? Absolutely. A Thermarest mattress, yes, compact and self-inflating with just enough air to keep your body off the cold ground. Pack 'n' Pedal's Dave Bowman accompanied me round the shop making sensible suggestions, picking up the chosen gear up and slinging it into a pile for a later price calculation. He gestured at a stand displaying Leki poles. They had rubber hand-holds, a single-twist adjustment system that locked together two interconnected hollow tubes to an exactly suitable length, steel tips fringed with rubber mud baskets to prevent the tips burying themselves, and each stick was nicely inner-sprung - you could push down on them and feel an invigorating bounceback under your hand.

"Leki poles? They're helpful," said Bowman. "They're very little extra weight."

I looked at the German-made hi-tech poles, and they seemed, for a New Zealand trumper, something of an affectation, and at \$210 a pair rather too expensive.

"No. I'll give those a miss."



"Right," said Bowman. "If you need it, I guess you can get a local Maori to cut you a rakau."

Dave Bowman was good to me. At the end of an hour I had my gear, and he'd rung the importer of Thorlo hiking socks, and secured four pair, plus their liners, for nothing. We went out the back for a final coffee, then he was called back into the shop. I finished my drink, and went out to say goodbye. Bowman was in conversation with a tall heavily-built man he introduced as Martin. Martin was a representative for the Leki poles.

"I was telling Martin about your walk," said Bowman.

"You should have the Leki poles," said Martin. "People are now turning on to them. I give them to journalists for trial and they come back to me: 'Wonderful' they say, 'these are so good I must buy them.'"

I'd told Dave Bowman earlier that my main worry about completing the walk was an old rugby injury that had slightly weakened one knee, and Martin had obviously heard the story.

"And you have a weakness in one knee, yes? With these poles - 25% of weight off the legs."

"You're German," I said..

Martin drew himself up.

"For that, should I apologise?" he said.

"Not at all," I said. "But I've got a theory on why so many Germans come to New Zealand to tramp in the wilderness."

"I am listening," said Martin.

"Around two thousand years ago," I said, "the Germans were a forest people. They lived in the woods at a time when the Romans were subduing Europe. In 9 AD there was a famous battle, where the German tribes, under Arminius, ambushed the Roman legions in the forest and wiped them out. Rome, to them, was the over-civilised city state they despised. After that battle Rome never regained control - it was like the Americans and the Viet Cong - a distant, highly developed fighting machine defeated by people who knew their own ground and for whom the wilderness was home. The woods were a fearful place for the Romans, but for the German tribes, they were the cradle of Germany itself, and have stayed at the heart of German mythology ever since.

"When the Nazis came to power," I was watching Martin and thought I saw him flinch. "they did more to preserve and extend the German forests than any German Government before or since. They did the same for the forests of Poland and Austria. Hermann Goering was Forest Minister, and while the Third Reich killed six million Jews, it is famous also for saving a million trees, and for the hunting lodges that were built deep inside the forests. Since then, " I said, "the German forests have shrunk and those that remain have been made spindly by industrial pollution. My theory is that it's this country's wild forests that attracts the Germans. They're the ones who occupy our huts and trails more than anyone else. They do it, maybe without even knowing, to recapture their own origins."

"No," said Martin. "The reason the Germans come here is because of the exchange rate. Plus," he said, "you cannot hike for more than 15 minutes in Germany without having to cross an autobahn."

I went to pick up my gear, paid up on the Eftpos, and shook Dave Bowman's hand. As I turned to leave

he pulled me aside.

"Martin," said Bowman, "wants you to have two Leki Poles. For nothing - free."

And that was how two Leki sticks came to be strapped to the side of my pack. But I hadn't used them on the first three days of my tramp. Now, the seven planets were strung out either side of a full moon, the stars were beginning to come out, and I had a long way to go. If ever there was a right time to try out the Lekis, this was it. I unstrapped them and began extending the poles to length.

Night time on the Ninety Mile: I'd done a long walk along a surf beach before - down Farewell Spit in 1984 - and after an hour or two on the spit, I'd heard them - the high, singing voices, the unattached scrag, the harmonics generated by crashing waves. On Ninety Mile Beach I hadn't noticed the effect particularly, though the previous night in the tent I'd heard sounds like rock music, just on the edge of definition, like a distant party, coming from the shoreline. On this night, with the wind dropped and nothing to interfere with the sound of itself, the surf still tumbled and hissed with a familiar continuity out to my right, but from down the beach, out of the darkness, came something I hadn't heard before. It was a low frequency blating out of the ocean, flat and unlovely, like something vaguely diabolic hitting leather behind a stone wall.

Stay light, stay tight, stay bright. The Lekis had little red adjustment wheels built into the handles, and I turned them to get the hand-straps absolutely to length. The poles felt good. So go! The great European adventurer Reinhold Messner endorsed these things for his Antarctic crossing, for his alpine feats, and now came the Ninety Mile test. But I hadn't done more than a couple of hundred metres in Leki mode, when a faraway light tracked down across what I took to be hillside. My heart lifted. If that was a car, it must be headed towards the only southern point of civilisation, the Waipapakauri Motor Camp, and although the light was distant, it wasn't too distant.. The lights stopped moving down, turned briefly toward me, winked, then disappeared. Then suddenly a huge dome of light rose from deep in the forest. My immediate eastern horizon was the sand-dunes and the light lay below that, but the effect was extraordinary - the whole range of dunes, for a kilometre or so, was back-lit by the light, frozen sharp-edged and black by it. The effect lasted perhaps five seconds, then the light vanished.

It stopped me in my tracks. What was that! I leaned on the Lekis - stunned, and staring into what was now a deep darkness. I walked on a kilometre or so. I walked past a twisted line of sharks. One after another, they were dead on the beach. They'd stranded on the beach alive, for each was enclosed in its own symmetrical pattern in the sand as it thrashed in a final circle of death. I could hear the ocean again - that infandous beating - from out in front.

And then the big light came again. I watched it as closely as I knew how. Not car lights. I couldn't see the top of the light dome, only the huge glow that radiated up from it, but whatever the source, it seemed as massive as some night-time sun about to rise over the dunes. Another ten seconds and it vanished again. My skin prickled. From the darkness out in front of me came that beaten-leather blating sound, and the ocean gave out a low but distinct croak.

I fumbled at the camera bags. No way would I miss the third appearance of the light. I extracted the Mavica but it was impossible both to hold it ready and use the Leki sticks too. It was a question of priorities, and the Lekis lost. I held the camera ready in my right hand, hooked the straps of both Lekis onto my left wrist, and for the rest of the night, instead of those proud punch-holes in the beach, each hole surrounded by the sand-flower pattern of its mud-basket, the Lekis left behind only those wandering drag-marks that any old stick might make, as trailed by any little kid, on any beach, anywhere.

The big light did not return, but by now I could see two tiny lights from Waipapakauri up front. Siren-like - they pulled me on, and it seemed right, significant even, that the Southern Cross itself was head down

and pointed directly at them. The moon rose, reaching towards a zenith. High up a satellite bobbed across the night sky. A meteor arced and died in a green burst, and I walked. The walk was open and free. I had discovered the obvious. Of all the great walks in New Zealand, this is perhaps the only one that can be easily done in the dark. Which should be done in the dark. I was feeling almost smug about the discovery. Nighttime on the Ninety Mile is a time when the wind has died. There is no sun to burn you, there are no rocks or roots on which to stumble. The temperatures are mild and the night sky is open from horizon to horizon. The dunes to the left, the surf to the right provided ghostly white margins to the route. I was on a giant runway, its vanishing point marked by those two dancing destination lights, and time, well time didn't matter at all.

Those goddam trickster lights. The distance from Hukatere to Waipapakauri, I'd been told by the two women on the dunes, was 12 kilometres, and I'd figured that was three or four hours walking. But the lights ahead looked the same now as they had hours ago. They could have been very close, and I saw them sometimes as the two lighted windows of a little cabin waiting just up the track to welcome me in. Or, they might still be many kilometres distant. By then I had walked three hours. The literature is full of the benign dissolution that can occur when an individual stands exposed long enough to the stars - the oceanic effect Arthur Koestler once called it. Yet on that long night-time walk down the Ninety Mile, as the kilometres surely rolled by underfoot but the two lights of Waipapakauri refused to get brighter or closer, I found myself buttoning right down. Forget the universe. Forget this featureless beach. If it was twelve kilometres to Waipapakauri, then that was simply the distance from my own Devonport house to Takapuna and back home again. I walked for ten minutes and I'd reached the end of Calliope Rd. Another quarter hour, and I was approaching Kings' Store. Twenty minutes on I was at Belmont, then trekking up past Takapuna Grammar to Hauraki Corner. I reached Takapuna and turned around. Ticking off the distances, I walked home again, but the Waipapakauri lights stayed exactly as they had stayed for the past three hours. I started off for Takapuna again, but by midnight I was ready to drop. I figured I'd walked well over that 12 kilometres down the perpetual runway, a distance that brought that day's total walking distance to around 40 kilometres and I was simply tired.

I went up into the dry sand and unrolled my sleeping bag. I stuck the hiking poles in the sand beside me and turned in. The two Lekis looked at me, thin, athletic, and totally sure of their worth in the moonlight. They spoke in unison: "Twenty-five percent less weight on those legs," they said. "If you'd used us, you would have made it."

"Look," I said to the Lekis, "Just forget it. Your time will come."

## #5 Sand's End

*Beach people talk about their place in the sun, and Te Araroa's first leg reaches its ending*

In the morning, I kept walking. Last night's lights had disappeared and the beach ahead showed no sign of Waipapakauri. Ninety Mile Beach was by now a familiar place. The blackback gulls were rising to a height of 15 metres or so, dropping a tuatua, stooping down, examining the shellfish victim for fracture, then rising again, dropping it again. The blackbacks had been doing that all the way down Ninety Mile, like they were trying to teach me something, though the few times I'd gone into the water to find tuatua I'd failed.



Another shark lay on the beach in its death circle. This one I photographed - and disappointed myself later that I didn't examine the fish closely enough while I had the chance, to confirm what others would later suggest - that the sharks drifted rudderless into the beach to die after they were caught in nets, had their dorsals cut off by the trawler fishermen for the oriental soup market, and were then dumped, still living, back into the tide.

The photograph though, when I looked at it later, seemed to show the dorsal cut off at an angle.

And Ninety Mile, as always, had its surprises. A flash of colour caught my eye. Out of the surf, out of nowhere at all, a bodyboarder came cruising in to shore.

I looked at him astonished as he removed his fins, and stepped toward me through the shallows, togged in a wetsuit, with the board tucked under one arm.



"I don't believe this," I shouted at him.

"I don't believe it," I said as he came closer.

"Yeah, yeah," said the bodyboarder.

"I mean, I'm walking along this deserted beach, and you come from nowhere - I mean - nowhere." "

"Yeah, yeah," he said.

"Just - nowhere. Australia or something?"

"Yeah, yeah," said the bodyboarder, and it suddenly occurred to me not only that he was a man of few words, but that I probably appeared over-wrought. We walked up the beach together.

"You're a local?"

"Yeah."

"Maybe you can explain something to me. Last night I saw a light in the forest. It was huge. It wasn't car lights."

The bodyboarder had a think. "What," he said, "extra-terrestrials?"

"As I've walked down Ninety Mile Beach," I said, "I've studied tyre tracks. I've been guided by tyre tracks sometimes when the wind was strong and I couldn't look up. It occurred to me then that any aliens who landed here would look at those perfectly patterned tracks that extend 100 kilometres from one end of Ninety Mile beach to the other, and take off in a funk at the fabulous development of a civilisation that could do such a thing, without ever knowing about the wheel."

"Yeah, yeah," said Vinda.

"What do you think the light was?"

"Sometimes they work in the forest at night, and it's lit up like a Christmas tree."

"Okay," I said, " these lights lasted about five seconds. It was like the sun coming up"

"Pig hunters?"

"Whatever - anyway, how did you get here?"

He worked in the local Triboard mill. He was on a day off. He was a keen surfer who'd driven down on forestry roads behind the dunes to do some solitary surfing. The only name he would give me - it was something to do with the surname Curry - was the one by which his mates called him. Vinda.

I walked into Waipapakauri at around 10 am, ordered up bacon and eggs and a 7Up at the store, and sat down at a trestle table on the wide store-front deck while 31½ year Lara sought repeatedly on her tricycle to break her own deck speed record.

From the trestle table, through Paradiso corner, on down the bark garden straight, moving smoothly into the Tiptop chicane before halting again at the trestle, she'd toss her head, pull back on the handlebars of the tricycle, look squarely into my eyes, and enquire casually whether I'd seen how fast she'd gone. I had, but I'd also laid out my map, and confirmed that the distance from Hukatere-Waipapakauri was more like 20 kilometres than 12. That was another by now familiar phenomenon of the beach - the people who'd stopped in cars to offer me lifts, and from whom I'd enquired about distances, had usually got it wrong. Walking and driving Ninety Mile Beach is two different things, and the car-drivers consistently underestimated distances.

Lara's mother, Justine Adams, came out to water the bark garden.

"Don't mind Lara - she's very - sociable."

Then Lara's father, Carl Wahrlich, came out with the bacon and eggs breakfast, and asked where I came from.



"Auckland? Justine ran a lawn-mowing contract down there. I was doing building and decorating. We sold our two-bedroomed bungalow at Te Atatu for \$150,000 three years ago and we bought this place for \$58,000 and put the shop in.

"And we love it. You don't hear the neighbour's toilet flushing. You don't hear the sirens at night or the smashing windows. It's mellow, but not too mellow."

I asked him about the light in the forest.

"Pig hunters maybe. Dope growers. It could be anything at this time of year. The rumour is the police go in there to practise their pistol shooting. A very bright light? I don't know."

I asked him about the sharks.

"It's the trawlers. At night they're so close you can throw stones at them. You can hear them talking on deck. They throw the sharks out of their nets, and they're too tired. Sharks don't commit suicide for nothing - sharks, seals birds, we had a pilot whale come in, 15 or 20 metres long maybe and it had the net marks on it.

"You do notice the difference after the trawlers have been through. They take what the locals live off, and we've had incidents - someone with an AK47 shooting at the boats from the dunes. They never used to fish this close in. They do now, but those sort of subjects are really touchy up here, and people can get their houses burned down.

"You can still catch snapper though, and lots of them. I'd have caught 250 snapper this year just surf casting off Waipapakauri ramp. Maybe 100 trevalli, a couple of hundred kahawai, flounder - heaps - you can go get 70 on a spear if you want to, just a spear and a light. They come in with the sweeps.

You have to know what you're doing. I watch for that brown stain in the water - what do whales eat? Yeah plankton, there'll be mullet hanging around that and snapper underneath. Low tide fishing is definitely snapper because you're getting out to deeper water, and the less waves, the more chance of a hole. You get gurnard, trevalli and kahawai off the mouths of the streams. Puffer fish - well, they're garden ornaments, when they're dry they look alright."

Justine and Carl did the shop, but for their food, they fished. Carl also turned a few extra dollars by watching up the beach for cars stuck in the tide - an SOS signal by torch, or even the flashing hazard lights of a stuck vehicle were visible for 10 or 12 kilometres at night and he'd get there in his Chevy Blazer, treated for beach-work, undersealed then gold-sealed with Fisholene, to haul them out.

He'd been raised close to Muriwai Beach and as a child had been the family spotter for the toheroa beds that the rest of them then dug for fritters. But he was pessimistic about the chances of the big shellfish's

survival on Ninety Mile Beach.

"They were seriously depleted during the war. They dredged the sand with tractors, tinned them, and sent them to the troops. They destroyed the beds, and it takes so long for them to grow. You find them, quite small, around the 5-inch mark, but that has taken 10 years, and people are still digging them up - everyone does.

" But look - put down Ninety Mile beach as still the best beach fishing in the country. Justine has got her diving ticket, I have, and one way or another we live off the beach. Fishing is how everyone lives up here - that and the tuatuas. They say if you go hungry in the north, you're doing something wrong. "

I asked about getting tuatuas.

"That's easy. There are tuatua beds all the way from here to Ahipara. You just go into the water at low tide and twist your foot in the sand, you'll feel them underneath, and if you're quick enough you can slide the shell apart just pushing with your thumb and eat them right then - food while you're fishing."

I left Waipapakauri along a Juken Nissho forest road for it offered a few kilometres of shade from the midday sun, but crossed down through the dunes for a 2 p.m. low tide. I had one more thing to do on Ninety Mile Beach, and I walked out amidst the blackbacks rising and dropping shellfish on the beach, into the water and ground my foot in the sand. Sure enough, you could feel the tuatuas underneath. I dug, and taking the advice of Carl Wahrlich, shucked a shell. It worked. I ate raw tuatua, and the taste was salty, muscular, the taste of the beach.

I went up into the dry sand and boiled up the rest of my haul for lunch. The 12 kilometres between Waipapakauri and Ahipara was sparsely populated now with surfcasters and shellfish gatherers, and vehicles were speeding along the beach, or simply stopped. I watched a man with one leg swing himself out of a mini-van on crutches until he was waist deep in the surf, could let the crutches drop and get tumbled shoreward by the surf. His whanau righted him again, helped retrieve the crutches, but the beach, even with dozens of people on it was still sufficiently vast to isolate each group utterly. The long reflections in the wet spoke more of emptiness than human occupation, and the shouts of every distant group were attenuated into something as thin as gulls crying. I walked on to Ahipara, and passed bright pockets of kiwi lifestyle. The 4WDs and utes drawn up along the beach. The dogs, the children, the men drinking out of the back of their wagons. The beach was a wonderful place - it was sometimes a terrifying place. It still claimed three or four lives a year, typically cuffing the unwary off the Bluff, but sometimes pulling them from the beach itself. Those dead had not known that the rogue wave, moving in over the long shallow fall of the beach, could quite slowly mount until it was rearing two metres higher than expected, smashing over the rocks, or sweeping that extra 30 metres up the sand.

I walked on towards the end of Ninety Mile Beach. Later that evening I stood at the open door of John and Caroline Locke's house overlooking the ocean at Ahipara. John was Welsh and had come to New Zealand in the 1970s, attracted to a teaching career. He was now headmaster at Kaitaia College, and he was a sailor who loved the sea. He'd taught himself welding, and built a steel yacht that took most of his time when he was not running the college.

We stood in the enclosed courtyard of the Locke house on the hill, and opened the sliding doors at the end of the courtyard to feel the breeze and to watch the ocean. The same planets were strung out from the moon, and the beach was spread out below.

"It's a high energy beach," said John Locke. "You get constant storms in the Tasman Ocean. The waves move out through hundreds of kilometres of ocean but when they hit this coast they still have a high percentage of that storm force. The bays and the headlands simply get worn away, and the beach - any

west coast beach if you compare it with the east coast - becomes long and straight.

"Look at those waves - they're coming in at a steady 12 a minute - you can see where the wave begins to distort and rise to that point where the surfers are paddling to catch the ride in. It's rising because the bottom of the wave is touching the sea bed, but there's more happening than a good ride. Whatever is loose on the seabed is being pushed shoreward by each successive wave. Those waves are making the beach, and both the waves and the wind are sorting the sediment. The sand tends to be extremely uniform - between 200 and 300 microns, no more no less - because that is the range between what is too big for the waves to shift from the ocean bed, and what is so small that, once on the beach, it simply gets blown away.

"Without bays or headlands to halt the drift, the movement of sediment up the coast is a significant force. It creates a long beach, a tombolo, where offshore islands have been linked by a spit. It's a classic landform, and a wonderful thing to study because you can see the changes going on so readily, and the interaction of the forces that create it. There's a reason why the west coast beach is shallow. Why the sand level drops in winter. It's all part of the Ninety Mile landscape, and I bring the kids down here to study it all, and try to show them that the beach is a bit more than they thought it was."



## The North - Section 2: Ahipara - Kerikeri

### #6 Gumfields and Forests

*Te Araroa explores beyond Ahipara and prepares to enter a Bermuda triangle of bush*

I borrowed John Locke's car, drove south along the beachfront, and turned up the Gumfield Road, climbing steeply to the uplands behind Ahipara. Before setting off on foot again, I needed to reconnoitre the trail. The plan I carried in my pack detailed a crossing of this old gumfield, then a traverse of four forests to finish at Kerikeri in the Bay of Islands, just over 100 kilometres to the south-east. But unlike Ninety Mile Beach, which is formally a walkway, the coast-to-coast route Ahipara-Kerikeri was often not a trail at all, simply a good idea for a trail.

I drove across the barren scrub-covered upland. This territory, bounded on its seaward side by Tauroa Cape, had for decades through to the 1920s supported a thriving industry, and a population of over 2000 people, many of them new immigrants. The Ahipara Gumfield was the place where many of New Zealand's Dalmatian families got their start.

That population was long gone and the road served only a few subsistence-style caravans set down clay driveways. Three kilometres in, a hand-painted roadside sign said: Whanau Whenua - Private Land. I stopped the car and saw a second sign, fallen from its post, half covered by weed, whose faded lettering declared: 'Tony Yelesh's Gumfields Museum.'. Even the museum seemed to have disappeared a long time ago. I drove on, and found the four-wheel drive track down which Te Araroa would turn from Gumfield Road. I headed slowly down it in the car, the wheels bouncing on the half-buried roots of a former forest..

Back in Auckland, I'd used a Claris Works drawing programme, to sketch in, with grids and a reasonable accuracy, a map of this area. I'd prepared a 44-page publication for Te Araroa Trust detailing a continuous foot trail for the North Island. A traverse of the gumfields formed part of it - everyone I'd discussed it with in the north thought it should be in the plan. The Ahipara field had been very big, and very rich. In two decades since the turn of the century it had poured resin into the world's linoleum, its varnish, and the high explosives of war. It was New Zealand history, and so I'd put it in - on paper. I'd drawn this 4WD track on the paper plan, and - dot, dot, dot, dot, on the computer, in red - I'd drawn in the trail along that road. Then, as the 4WD track ended, dot, dot, dot, I'd simply drawn the traverse down through a kilometre of private land to connect through to the Herekino Forest.

Now I was facing the reality. The going was getting rough, and I stopped the car and got out. The desiccated foreleg of a steer lay on the ground, hoof still attached. It looked like the people down here lived on home kills. I walked down to a collection of small shacks at the road's end. More desiccated forelegs, and dogs prowled. I knocked on doors but there was no-one home.

The traverse down to Herekino Forest from here looked easy enough, but it needed consultation with two landowners. There was a strip of Maori land, with Selwyn Clark in charge, and a spread further down belonging to Jim Berghan, a motel owner at Ahipara. I needed to persuade both men that the trail could work and might even be reason enough, if a national trail settled in, to reform the old museum. Many of the gumfields relics - the wash-down plant, the dams, hoses, and nozzles used for blasting gum from the soil, and the long probes were, I'd been told, still preserved.

But there was no-one home at Clark's place, and Jim Berghan was away from his motel at Ahipara. Time was beginning to press. I needed not just to traverse the gumfields, but to find a guide through Herekino,

the first of the four forests I had to cross.

Back at the Locke house that night I rang Eddie Smith. Every time I'd rung DOC's Northland conservancy, seeking advice on crossing the four forests, that same name had come up - Eddie Smith. He was the best bushman around, but he was always out in the forest shooting goats, or doing what was called compliance and law enforcement - hunting the native bird poachers, or, most recently, cleaning up after a drug bust on Little Barrier Island..

But this time Eddie Smith answered. I explained Te Araroa, and my need to cross the forests west to east, an unusual direction which would have to use unsignposted hunting tracks and go through some untracked forest. The bushman warmed to the idea.

"You'll need to go in on the old trail at the summit of the Herekino Gorge Road. The hunters still use it, but remember - you're on a plateau that brings you down naturally to Wainui, and you don't want to end up there. You'll find the horizon lets you down, and it can be difficult. The poachers have taken the markers off the trails and faced them in a different direction. You need to sidle east there, and that gets you through to the Herekino logging road. That's part of the old walkway and it's easy - turn left when you hit the road, and right at the next track intersection. That'll take you past Taumatamahoe, and watch for red tape leading off the track - I've already marked the route up to the top with tape. From the summit you can just drop down the ridge - you'll do the crossing in a day."

None of that meant anything to me, and I asked him to act as a guide. No, he couldn't. The DOC work was full on at that moment, but if I wanted to bring the maps round that night, he'd mark in the trails.

Eddie Smith was a short barrel-chested man with a big open face, a direct descendant of Serb immigrants who'd worked on the Ahipara gumfields. He had a handshake like hitting a slab of clay, and he led me past the glow of his outdoor security lights, through a corrugated-iron semi-round barn filled with vehicles and into a house that opened straight from the barn to the sitting room. It was decorated with photographs of sports teams, a poster giving every specification of the crack Italian Benelli rifle, a framed photo of an American eagle, and in pride of place, swell-breasted, and iconic against the branching crown of a kauri tree, a picture of the kereru, the native woodpigeon.

Eddie Smith took my 1:50,000 maps and marked in a trail. I could do some compass work, and was reasonably bush savvy - did he think I could handle the Herekino Forest alone? He did not. Herekino was a very confusing place. Every hill was roughly the same height, and that made navigation, particularly over the first section, very difficult. Herekino was the Bermuda triangle of the Northland native forests.

I went back to the Locke's. I tried to raise a guide Eddie Smith said might be available, but he wasn't home, and it was Caroline Locke who suggested an alternative. Roger Gale, a local hardwood forester and mobile sawmiller was the kind of man who might take on the challenge. I rang Roger and explained the trail. He was immediately interested, but he had commitments - a bit of salvage timber he'd promised to take out of the bush. He'd see what he could do. An hour later he rang back. If I could meet him at the entrance to Herekino Forest at 9.30 tomorrow morning, he'd take me through....

## #7 The Forester

There are men of the forest who are the natural guardians of that forest - but they can get lost too



Roger Gale gestured with one of his Leki sticks towards a thicket of harsh vegetation standing up maybe half a metre. "King Club moss - amazing stuff. Stiff - it vibrates like wire, and if you picked it, it'd still be green in five months time. It's the world's biggest lycopod - a moss! And I've seen it taller yet. You can sell this stuff to the florists in Auckland for maybe 35 cents a stem. We could fill up our packs and we'd make \$100s from a single journey - not that you'd want to encourage that."

"Hear that?" I listened. A barely-melodic tic, tic, tic came from amidst a bracken and dry-stick grove perhaps 30 metres distant. Then an answering tic, tic. "A fern bird," said Gale. Quite rare. Over there." His Leki pointed now to a slender-trunked Dr-Seuss-like tousle-headed tree. "*Dracophyllum* - I can never figure why New Zealand doesn't market those trees as a decorative shrub. And over here - a Kirk's Daisy. It flowers once every seven years, just a stunning sight with a purple stamen and big petals."

DOC was official caretaker of Herekino Forest, but it was locals like Gale who knew the bush as well as, or better than, most of DOC. Roger Gale was a forester. He had an interesting history. His father had been a top anti-apartheid campaigner, a Vice-President of New Zealand's CARE before moving to Australia, founding CARE there, and he'd chaired an anti-apartheid conference in New York 12 years ago before coming back, early 50s, a fit jogger, and dropping dead within 24 hours. His son suspected BOSS, the former South African secret police organisation.

Roger Gale himself had been an early HART activist. He'd been known to police for daredevil action, but it all stopped when, a few days after an arson at an Auckland rugby grandstand in the 70s, he'd come home from visiting a friend to see a stranger moving away from his house. He searched the flat top to bottom, found the evidence the intruder had planted, and disposed of it just an hour before the police raided his house to nail him. But the fright was real. If the police gambit had succeeded he'd have faced years in jail. He cut away from the movement, and had finished up in Herekino with a 100-acre hardwood plantation and a small business, taking a mobile chain-saw mill into the bush to bring out, in manageable lengths, native timber from trees that had simply grown old and fallen over, or that had been felled by storms.

"We'd better keep moving," said Gale, and again the Leki pointed, with more purpose than I'd ever been able to give it, at featureless bush-clad hills perhaps a kilometre distant. "The Herekino Logging Road is somewhere over that ridge."

It had taken us only an hour to get to the King Club moss, though I'd already been walking since 7.30 a.m. After Gale's phone call the previous night, I'd given up my plan to come down to Herekino Forest

through the gumfield - it required more organisation and more time than I could muster. I got up early, and walked from Ahipara round to Herekino Forest by road, Gale had arrived in a friend's jeep and we'd struck immediately into the bush, climbing steeply to 300 metres. Gale had quickly spotted the Leki poles, and asked to try them. The things loved him, gaining him such speed on that first pinch that I blamed the Lekis for trying to distance themselves from me, but never Gale, who was a gentle and considerate man.

Gentle, considerate, acute. There wasn't a sign on the track that he didn't pick, and interpret. "You see that," he'd point out as we paused for a water stop. "A fresh mark, a boot, and the guy didn't have dogs."

Okay. There was something sinister about the lack of dogs, but I was more interested in staying on the trail. It had no markers, and we kept losing it. The bush would suddenly close in, but Gale had a sixth sense of where the ridge was - I came to call it his ridge logic - and he'd head towards it and pick up the trail again. As we bush-bashed downhill from the King Club moss though, we were without a trail. We picked one up in the valley, following red tags, and then the trail seemed to continue, but the markers had vanished.

"Horses." Gale stopped. The track had been ploughed by hooves.

My mind went back to the previous night with Eddie Smith. Sometimes, Smith had said, the poachers ride the horses right at you. It wasn't his business to bust marijuana plots, but poaching was something else. They came into this forest to shoot kereru, and the species was steadily crashing. The breeding cycle was long, and at the end of the mating season there'd be maybe just one egg in a nest, and the possums could get to that, but the biggest threat was the men with rifles. It wasn't just the old argument of whether dying kaumatua got a bird that tasted of the miro berry, like the gift Sir Graham Latimer brought to Dame Whina Cooper four years back. The new poachers were organised to market the birds, and would bring out a dozen or more at a time. They'd be raffled in pubs both in the north, and in Auckland, and could fetch, said Smith, \$200 each. Smith tracked the poachers. He'd had threats to burn his house down, but he kept going, particularly in the season February-May when the birds were at their fattest. When he learned Gale was going across the forest with me, Smith had asked Gale to keep an eye out - for horse sign in particular.

"There may well be some meadows around here," said Gale, but you could see that marijuana didn't particularly bother him. What did bother him was just around the next turn in the track.

He turned off, and went down on one knee, turning over trampled vegetation.

"They've tethered the horse."

We went further in. Electric fence tape was strung between the pungas. A white plastic ice cream container lay on the ground. Orange peel.

"Pigeon shooters," said Gale. "Pig hunters don't stay."

He went around in a kind of controlled fury, ripping down the string the hunters had used to pitch their fly from the trees.

"I wish I had a calling card," said Gale. "To tell them. We were here. We were watching you. Look at this." He kicked the container. "They're messy sods aren't they?"

And then he was gone.

He'd disappeared straight up, shinnied up the trunk of a kahikatea and was swaying 20 metres away in the tops.

"Roger?"

"Yeah. Hang on. I'm getting a compass bearing. Eddie will want to know where to find this place."

The horse trail went on and we followed it, but it was a distraction. Gale kept consulting the compass, and we were heading north, not east.

"And we're falling - we're going down," said Gale. "Things aren't right," he kept saying, and he no longer meant the pigeon poachers.

The trail came to a T junction marked with an old knife scabbard, and I got my first inkling that we might be lost, when Gale took a long swig from his water bottle, turned to me and asked casually, "which way do you want to go?"

Downhill. The trail was clear enough, and after another 800 metres or so, we fetched up at a distinctive hairpin bend in a small river. The watercourse was large enough to be shown on the map, but we couldn't find any river with a hairpin.

"They map from the Orions," said Gale. "Using special glasses - it may be they missed it under the bush cover." But it didn't sound convincing. We ate lunch.

I crunched on a Kaitaia Pak'n Save special, a Pam's chocolate-covered muesli bar. Gale had the big healthy sandwiches, the apple, the yoghurt - but he was restless. Barely finished lunch, he jumped up.

"I'm going to find out where we are," and he crashed away. For the next 20 minutes I filtered water out of the stream, and saw Maori sign near the bank - a small kauri sapling, its leafy top still vigorously seeking the light, but below that its stem tied in a granny knot, a tree that would be harvested later to furnish some old kuia with a walking stick.

Then Gale was back. He sat down, looked at me and said, "I think maybe you should sack me."

"Where are we?"

"Wainui. That's the Wainui River."

We were way off course. We'd made the mistake Smith had warned about, followed a false horizon and the grain of what felt right, but even when foresters get into trouble, the distinction between them and the next man may be that they know how to get out of it. Over the next hour, we broke out of the forest onto farmland, jumped fences, pushed across one field that was filled with daisies, and finally re-entered the forest on the clay track we'd sought from the beginning - the old Herekino Forest Road.

From that moment, Gale redeemed himself. Even the main tracks were confusing, with the signs at various track intersection either non-existent, or lying in the grass separate from their stanchions. We found blank bullets that the army had used in here for jungle training.

We rounded a bend in the track and saw, perched just thirty metres away, a kereru. As I steadied the camera on Gale's shoulder, it occurred to me that a rifleman might do the same, and I felt the same anger that had shaken Gale for the outlaws within Herekino who were destroying this bird. The kereru were so fearless they'd sit right above you sometimes, feeding, showering you with half-eaten nikau seeds, or flower petals. So easy to take the photograph. So easy to make the shot.

Gale was steady and unerring in this section, and his bush knowledge made the traverse a joy. "Kawaka," he'd pat the shreddy trunk of a forest tree, and make his comment on the timber. "Tough red wood. They use it for ornamental inlays." We came up to a giant Puriri. "You can see," said Gale, "even when the trunk falls, it roots, and the new growth goes straight up from there. They live forever, and you can polish the wood to a mirror finish, like ebony, but multicoloured, purple, pink, yellow, brown all mingled together. You can get amazing pictures in the wood."

And once we diverted, tired of the colonising cutty grass that clogged the main track, into deep bush and rested there, eating forest food, the supplejack tips that tasted like a cross between asparagus and a raw bean, but like something else too, sharp-edged.

"It's mild," I commented, "but you can taste that it's wild too."

"Everything here is wild," said Gale. "And that's the thrill of it, you're here amongst it, you're part of it."

The bush was a tangled jungle as far as the eye could penetrate into the density all around. It was dappled, vegetative, alive, and very quiet. "Except that it doesn't care," I said, "if you live or die in here."

"That's the point," said Gale. "Like the bush - you've got to be good enough, you've got to be wild yourself, to survive."

He was paying close attention to the compass. A red tag lay alongside the trail - was this the sign Smith had talked about? No, it was too soon to divert onto the summit of Taumatamahoe. Half an hour on, there was another tag, and as if to mark it as significant a Herekino wild pig had left a coarse hair arrowed into the fold. We left the track and climbed to the top on a line of red markers. It seemed like we were getting close to completing the crossing.



At the summit, Gale took my BellSouth mobile and rang a friend, Peter Griffiths, who lived on Takahue Rd. It was time to come get us, we'd be down the ridge and out onto Diggers' Valley Road in what? - 20 minutes or half an hour maybe. As we left the summit, Gale commented: "This bit's fine. I've done it before, we'll be swinging from tree to tree all the way down."

We didn't. We ran into supplejack thickets, and wrenched our way through. We climbed over fallen logs and sometimes stumbled onto a track and sometimes lost it. An hour went by. It was still a civilised enough traverse that we could carry on a conversation about all the New World forests of the past which had been explored and hardships endured simply for the fascination of finding new botanical species, and to ship the new plant species back to the Old World. It was a feature of American exploration in the 19th century, and before that it was the source of Joseph Banks' excitement when he landed on these islands, the first Europeans with botanical knowledge, in 1769. You could now feel dusk closing down on the bush, but Gale never let himself be stampeded by any sense of crisis.

"Talking about new species," he said, "Here's one I don't know."



He was on his hands and knees peering at a little forest flower, and muttering an incantation of remembrance: "Flower parts in multiples of three, six stamen, each alternate one sterile with no anthers."

Dusk closing in, the guy was incorrigible.

"Look," I said. "I can just take a photograph of it."

"You can? Great."

The ridge steepened and a dense field of the bush succulent they call pig-weed clothed the slope. Pig weed - watery enough to send you sliding across it, insufficiently strong to stop that slide once you got up a bit of momentum, clutched at its raggy leaves and carrotty stems and felt them snap under you hand. The weed was leafy and tall enough to disguise all the little guts in this water-gullied slope that could

suddenly throw you downward. I wrenched my shoulder trying to stop one slide, and around us the dusk was steadily deepening to darkness.

How much further? We called, but there was no answering shout. The ridge tilted toward vertical. More pig-weed, more rotten trunks that refused your weight and went crashing and sliding on ahead, more supplejack that slipped down between your body and your pack halting your progress, so you strained, and twisted free of its restraint, then catapulted alarmingly forward. I fell down, I got up, I yelled again, and from far below, discouragingly distant but welcome too, came an answering cry.

"Yeeehah!" cried Gale, but it was another half hour before we stumbled dishevelled out of the bush. It was 8.30 p.m. and Peter Griffiths stood on the road.

"I know what you guys have done," said Griffiths.

"We got lost, " said Gale.

"I know what you've done," repeated Griffiths. "That's a hard crossing."

"We got lost at Wainui," said Gale.

"It's a very mysterious forest," said Griffiths. "Everyone gets lost. Wainui. Yeah - everyone fetches up at Wainui."

We reached his car, and started off down the Diggers' Valley Road. Griffiths half turned to where I sat in the back, covering myself with the dog's blanket to keep warm, and pushing the hard hindquarters and claws of his little Staffordshire bitch off my thighs as she strained to stick her nose out the window.

"That was a real burst you guys did. You'd be the first I can think of to come right through the forest on that route for seven or eight years. I've got a cold beer waiting."



## #8 The Big Picture

*The field boss of the Far North Conservation Corps remakes the Northland Forests*



Peter Griffiths was a big man with a kind of balletic poise. He filled the corrugated iron shack he'd built just out from Takahue with the presence any big man brings to a small space, but the difference was a refinement of gesture and thought. It was a physical and intellectual en pointe, rising up on his toes to emphasise any verbal crescendo, his thumb and forefinger pressed into an ellipse that moved precisely up and down to further refine the emphasis, like he was doing needle-point.

As a sideline he made knives from old circular saw blades, fitting native-wood handles, but his main job was heading up the Far North's Conservation Corps, a group of 12 youths taken from the unemployment lists, finding them useful work, testing them in the bush..

"Roger talked to me by phone about what you are doing, and I think your trudge - " rising onto his toes, leaning forward, the thumb and forefinger sewing a considered new definition into place " - your trudge Geoffrey - is important."

Having a shower out the back from a bucket of water heated on the gas ring. Sitting down clean. Drinking the beer. Having a smoke. I was thinking that the trail itself was maybe less important than the chance it gave you at the end of the day - the entry it naturally brought with it - to get into other people's lives and experience their goodwill. It is a fundamental human luxury, and it is ages old. It is in the fairy tales. It is the hospitality of an inn when the way through the tangled forest outside - *pace* Herekino - has been dark and inhospitable. It is at its most pure in rough dwellings. It is the relief of falling for a while into good company. Of eavesdropping the gossipy web of a community you have entered for the first time: the local Dalmatian, aged in his 70s, who'd had hit a miscreant so hard - and Griffith's hand traced the sheer dynamic joy of it - that he was still rising when he hit the pub wall; the other old local famous for a small private forest with growth rates that'd left the big commercial concerns, who'd studied his techniques, dumbfounded.

Gale nodded. "He has difficulty walking, but he does everything. The pruning, pest and fungal control. He even pisses on the trees."

And the smell of food. As we talked, a meal was cooking - Griffiths, the pasta and chili mince man, was cooking on two gas rings, and Sabrina Raad his partner, was doing the salads and a special vegetarian main for Roger Gale.

Sabrina Raad was working at the Bushland Trust out of Kaitaia, bringing back into the public domain with planting and tracks two unusual dune lakes in the sand behind Waipapakauri. A pair of clogs stood beneath the TV set. She was Dutch, had come north a few years back as a possum shooter, and met Griffiths. She loved plants - a gardener - and Griffiths was no slouch either. Gale mentioned the forest flower he hadn't recognised, I obliged with a replay on the digital, and Griffiths took time out from the wok

to pounce.

"It's the forest floor lily - Anthro - Anthro . . ." He was already leafing through a reference book, found the photograph, and completed the phrase. "*Anthropodium candidum*."

I was lying back on my second glass of home brew thinking: I have fallen in amongst more foresters, and it was true. After the meal, Griffiths launched onto why, and how, the big forests could be brought back to a use beyond the poaching and pot growing that was now so rife.

"The northern forests are safe. Even Waipoua. You remember the case. That guy that got lost and he was three parts blind, deaf, and quite old. Three weeks later was it? Out he staggers. There's no such thing as dying from exposure up here. In Australia, you go to sit down in the bush, and you look around, and then you look again, because there's a bull ants' nest, or a trap-door spider, or a redback, or one of 30 varieties of snake that can kill you, or nettles that can bring you into a condition of agony. And here? Onga onga - in terms of direct assault, that's it.

"You've got safe forests, and you need the development of a culture for those forests, but it can't be foreign to what we have now. When I was 18 at Hutt Valley High School I'd come across from Australia, and this is what struck me. Everyone went tramping with their mates. It's deeply entrenched in kiwis to flop around in the bush.

"You've got to fit in with what we are, and with what is real. And you know what I want? I want these forests used again.

"Now DOC. It's no longer interested in doing field work. They're doing the possums, they're counting the birds, they've got the expertise, but apart from that there's very little going on. I want DOC to act as standards management, but for the local communities to put up the people and run the forest enterprises. They put up the people who work as concessionaires of DOC. These guys are tied in to search and rescue, firefighting, and environmental protection. They're trained to deal with tourists. They have good PR skills. The concession specifies that they can charge for track maintenance, for guided tours that bring people through and put them up at the communities or the marae for the night, for scientific, and photographic and hunting tours, for pest control, but they're not DOC, they're members of a guild.

Griffiths was thinking on his feet. Rising up, sewing it into place. "The Foresters' Guild," he said. "I'd have them in a distinctive uniform - a fishing, shooting, good clean bloke image. That's it. I want the good keen bloke reborn as a professional. I want a three-year course and something for the kids to aspire to. My kids. The ones that we pick out of the long-term unemployment lists, do a 12-week course, and then drop back on the rubbish heap. I want colour coding so when someone's an apprentice, you can see he's an apprentice, and then when you see someone wearing the orange - that's really something. Something to point to in the street, and people say: 'He's a forester. He's a Bushman First Class.'

"Orange!" said Sabrina.

"Orange," said Griffiths. "Because of attention to safety you'd have to make the uniform orange."

"I don't think orange is good," said Sabrina.

"Okay - I don't care," said Griffiths.

"I think," said Sabrina, "it should be like a green coat in the forest."

"Look. Anyone can buy a green Swandri," said Griffiths.

"Well." said Sabrina. "Purple then."

"I don't care about the colour," said Griffiths.

But we were tired as dogs after a hard tramp, and it was time to bed down. We followed Griffiths down to the bach Sabrina Raad was building at the bottom of the land. It wasn't quite finished, but it was roofed and rainproof with a mattress on the floor, and a hammock slung from the beams - room enough for two to sleep. Gale took a look at the bare particle board floor, and said:

"That's not sealed. It'll be giving off a gas."

He turned to me. "The hammock might keep you far enough off the floor, but I'd open the windows." Then he went outside, arranged his sleeping bag there on a ground sheet, pulled a plastic sheet over the bag, climbed in and closed his eyes.

"That's just Roger being Roger," said Griffiths as I unrolled my sleeping bag onto the hammock inside. "He's a vegetarian, there's gas coming out of the floor, there's a load of things he won't eat because of the chemicals in it, and he's the toughest guy I know. I've been out on jobs with him, and he's laid his heel right open at the back. He takes out a needle and thread, sews it back together and just keeps working. He's steel, I love him.

"He's the best pakeha bushman I know. Don't judge by Herekino. Any bush around here - it's so hard in there when you're off the trails. It's the density of the canopy. Diffuse light. The lack of pattern in the topography. The way the ridges that look defined on the map go wide and soft. The depressed saddles - they're the confusers - you don't know which way down is, and which way up is. You can miss a knob by five metres, come down in the wrong catchment, and over a long traverse that five metre miss can turn into miles."

I lay there in the tight net of the hammock, thinking over those words. The next day I planned an easy forestry road walk by myself to cover the distance from Diggers' Valley Road, through Takahue, and on to the next forest - Raetea. Te Araroa's route meant a traverse of some untracked bush inside Raetea, but Roger Gale had agreed to come through that next forest too.

## #9 Raetea

*Second forest confirms there is light at the end of every tunnel*

Next morning Peter Griffiths drove me to where he'd picked me up on Diggers Valley Road, and I set out walking again. I went a few hundred metres down the road before going cross-country, as detailed by the paper plan in my pack, on a Juken Nissho forest road. It was pleasant walking. A stream flowed alongside, Australian rosellas flashed among the pines, and the gated and seldom-used Otaneroa Road was clothed side to side with pennyroyal, whose distinctive scent drifted up from underfoot. I got to Takahue, sat down for lunch on the now-grassy site where the school had been deliberately burned down in 1995, then walked up a quiet metal road to the sign that said "Mangamuka Walkway - Six Hours."

Roger Gale and I started out from that point the next day. Peter Griffiths and his Conservation Corps team had re-marked the Mangamuka trail with DOC's orange walkway triangles just a few months before, though there'd been growth since, and we hacked at it with a parang. The day was overcast, and as we climbed the forest got misty and wet. Like every high forest, this one was often bathed in cloud even when the rain held off - every tree here was green-gilled with liverwort, hung with lichens, and you could hear the wind breathing through it all.



From the Mt Raetea summit, 744 metres up, we climbed a radio mast and could see the Hokianga Harbour trailing inland until its upper reach turned into the Mangamuka River. Right there, too far into distance to make out, was our destination - the small settlement of Mangamuka Bridge.

The Mangamuka trail led through to State Highway One twelve kilometres above Mangamuka Bridge, but Te Araroa's plan - which kept road-walking to a minimum - called for us to leave the main trail about two thirds the way along its length, to bush-bash cross-country again and to pick up another track series to the south-east. Those tracks led down to Mangataipa Road, and from there it was a quick road-walk to Mangamuka Bridge. The publican at the Mangamuka Bridge Hotel, Harry Williams, owned the single piece of private farm-land we'd have to cross down near Mangataipa Rd and the previous night I'd rung the pub to okay that stretch. Booming trance music and the roar of a stoked country pub drifted back up the line while Williams was fetched. He'd okayed the crossing, and I was looking forward to finishing our tramp in his pub, and suggesting to him that the route across his land might sometime be linked into a national trail.

Such are the dreams of men. Two kilometres along from Mt Raetea, on the flank of another 727-metre summit the marked trail led away north reaching towards SH1, and we abandoned it to bush-bash down the ridge, seeking to link through to the south-eastern track network.

We struggled for ten minutes down-ridge through supplejack, and to escape it, headed briefly left. There in front was an orange trail marker. That was impossible, and I had a moment of serious disorientation. The topo map gives a view of the landscape that's like looking down from twelve kilometres up - about the height the American test pilot Chuck Yeager reached in an early rocket-powered Bell experimental aircraft

in the 1950s before the thing started to skip and tumble at the top of the atmosphere.

I looked down at the map, while the world about me slowly spun. I looked up. Where am I Chuck? I looked around at the bush and the bush looked back, as featureless, in that moment, as the ether. The alert Roger Gale had already made one sudden stop when we were descending Raetea. He was open to instinct, feeling a shift in the bright blur of the sun, feeling the wind on his cheek change, and had been assailed by a sudden doubt. We'd reasoned our way round that one - the wind had simply changed - and anyway I was perfectly happy back then just following orange triangles. But not now - this little triangle we'd come up against was not susceptible to logic, unless we'd just gone in a tight, crazy circle, or perhaps had left the track at the wrong point..

"We haven't gone in a circle," said Gale. The thought was an affront to basic bushcraft.



Nor had we left the trail at the wrong point - the explanation was that the Conservation Corps had run a few orange markers south-east down the hill, but they soon tailed out and we were back to good solid ridge logic.

Gale was being super-careful. He was feeling the ridge with his feet. He was gauging not just the ridge but the rise and fall of it - knobs on the ridge - we needed the third one down. We crossed a depressed saddle - the confuser - we found the third knob, and Gale climbed a rata to get the lay of the land. He descended with the humus of various epiphytes staining his camouflage trousers, but happy.

We left the ridge and cut directly east, a direction that would intersect with those other dotted track lines on the map.

"We're about 15 minutes from that track now," said Gale, "by a random estimate."

Down into the gullies. Through the pig weed, the supplejack thickets. We picked up the sound of a stream where no stream existed on the map, and we were seeking a track that was not well-formed - it would be easy to cross it at right-angles without ever knowing and to crash onward into wilderness.

"Yeegah," cried Gale. We shook hands. He'd found it, overgrown, barely a track, blocked often by rotting trunks or cascades of dry sticks, filled with the colonising ferns and sharp-edged grasses that choke unmaintained trails, but a track all the same, just where the map said it should be, and we now stood on a continuous route down to Harry Williams' land just six kilometres away, beyond that to Mangataipa Rd, beyond that to Mangamuka Bridge, and beyond that - I could hear it already - the trance music of the Mangamuka Bridge Hotel. Trampers' end.

We pushed our way through eye-level fern, and shouted warnings one to another when we felt the bush lawyer. We emerged onto a grassy plateau with a small decrepit shelter that looked to have been built in the 1930s.

Problem. Our single overgrown trail suddenly proliferated into five overgrown trails that led away from the plateau. It was an old logging camp, and the drag-routes of the logs, smashing down the bush, had created for every trail that was the right one, four dummy diversions. The place wasn't marked on the map, there were no trees to climb, and I was suddenly aware that the afternoon was drawing in.

My hands were bleeding from the rakings by bush lawyer. The clouds had gathered. I could sense a crisis of sorts, but the word, in its Greek form, simply meant choice. Gale was choosing, and he responded to the crisis in the Galean manner, carefully studying the compass, the land, the clouds, all of them conspiring in my mind, to lose us, then pointed forward and said: "See that bush? That's the one Peter was talking about. Very rounded leaves with a reddish sheath. Yellow flowers. We don't know what it is."

I reconnoitered some of the drag routes, hoping they'd cancel themselves by dead-ending. They didn't. We chose one, but it started heading north. We came back. When in doubt, follow the cattle, and the next track was imprinted with hooves, but it tailed out after 15 minutes onto a grassy glade with no exit.

Roger climbed a tree and was there a long time.

"You can see Mangamuka Bridge?" I suggested.

"No," he called back. "This map isn't doing what I want it to do."

He climbed down finally. Rain had begun to fall lightly.

"I've taken a bearing on a pine plantation. It's about 1.8 kilometres away - about that far," he said, pointing to a distant ridge. "If we can get to the pines, they'll lead us out."

We both set our compasses and headed off cross-country. Darkness fell while we were still in the bush. Sometimes we broke out onto old logging tracks where grass grew, followed them as long as was tolerable on the compass bearing, dived back into bush, forded a stream, then reached a stretch of relatively open manuka, and at 9.30 p.m. we reached the pines. We found a forest road and followed it in the darkness, slipping on the occasional unseen ruts, and sometimes missing the turns.

Every trumper knows this ending. You're safe, but the last stretch is interminable. At 11.15 p.m. we saw a light in the darkness. We went up and knocked at the door. Two dogs threw themselves at the screen and an old man in pajamas looked up from his lighted room and moved slowly sideways and out of sight before coming to the door. I wondered if he'd gone to get a rifle, and I wouldn't have blamed him. But he was only, slowly, negotiating his way to the entrance. We explained we were trampers and Bert Williams invited us in. His wife Nell came sailing out of the bedroom in a robe.

"You boys would like a cup of tea. Biscuits? Just some hard old leftovers"

She banged down a tin.

"Christmas is coming and the geese are getting fat," sang Nell apropos of nothing in particular but Christmas itself, then just three days away.

And Christmas plenty was within the house. The dismissively introduced leftovers turned out to be homebaked gingernuts, delicious. The house was at the top of Kauaepepe Rd, and Roger Gale rang Peter Griffiths to make the pickup. Instead of waiting inside, we suggested, we could put our boots back on and keep walking down the road to meet the car.

"Oh absolutely not," said Nell, serving the tea. "You will wait here. We belong to the old days. When something happens we see it out to the bitter end."

She was aged 82, and her husband 81.

## #10 Omahuta

*Christmas Eve waits for no man, and despite a setback, Te Araroa tries to match the speed of its approach*

Time was racing towards Christmas Eve - and as for the walker, he was, what was the word? Trudging forward. I'd been careful to keep Te Araroa free of a timetable. Some of the walk was, literally, trailblazing, and my distances each day were unpredictable. I had also to get necessary permissions for some of the crossings, and sometimes I needed to sit still and just record the journey. That meant breaking out the Toshiba Satellite Pro 440CDX laptop, and writing up the latest episode. It meant downloading the photographs off the Mavica's floppy disc onto the computer, plugging in the BellSouth Nokia and its modem, making the data-call, and e-mailing the latest story and picture package out through the mobile to the web site producers.

It was all taking time - no matter, I was timetable free - but for Christmas eve 1997, I'd made a date. My wife Miriam and my son Amos had set up a rendezvous at the Puketi Forest Headquarters, the end-point of the four-forest crossing.

I was falling behind. The tramp Roger Gale and I had done through Raetea had made one false move at the logging camp, and we'd finished up at a forest edge 15 kilometres away from Mangamuka Bridge. If I was to do a continuous walk, I needed to pick up the trail again there, and I did - starting at the Williams house, re-entering the forest and picking up a forest track running south-east. The map showed it linking with another trail along the Omakura Stream. Either I missed the turn, or that link didn't exist. The forest track tailed out, but I moved easily through the pines, then bush-bashed a short distance to find the stream.

I was alone and the bush-bashing was different. Roger Gale had said goodbye - he'd guided me across the two most trackless forests, twice the job he said he'd do at the outset, and he'd peeled off to catch up with his work. As the bush closed round again, as one leg sank through the false solidity of fallen punga fronds and the other struggled to maintain balance, I knew that if you copped a broken leg in here, you'd be just one more lonely and wounded animal trying to survive. But this is just a New Zealand risk, taken commonly enough and, given the size of our forest cover, the only surprising thing is that so few actually get caught.

I found the boggy stream track and followed it, flushing out two wild goats before I hit the highway. I reached Mangamuka Bridge at 4.30 p.m. The pub was not buzzing, the trance music was not playing, Harry Williams was not in - it was all too early, but with the long loop back from Kauaepepe Rd, I'd fallen a day behind schedule and, beyond downing three straight L&Ps and accepting the barmaid's offer to re-fill my water bottle with ice-cold water, couldn't stop.





I walked on, up a road that a sign warned was unmaintained, to the edge of the Omahuta Forest. I found the concrete pads of the old forestry headquarters, and camped there. The crack of high-velocity rifles woke me later and I looked out to see searchlights sweeping the nearby trees. I played my own torch over the tent interior to announce myself as a bullet-free zone, then fell asleep again.

The road into the Omahuta Forest is not listed as a walk by DOC, but it may as well be. In that darkened computer room in Auckland I'd knitted it into Te Araroa's track plan, but without knowing the territory, and it was encouraging to see it unroll pretty much as I'd imagined. It was little-used - no vehicle passed me on the four-hour walk in. It often had grass growing on it, and with its kauri, and the smart DOC signs detailing this and that side-track, was a pleasant route.



Except that, having overindulged the previous afternoon on the ice-cold water from the Mangamuka pub, I'd set off on a four-hour tramp through this forest with no water left in the bottle. The day was hot, and the streams indicated on the map were dry. I finished up filtering the seepage water that had gathered here and there in the road's wheel ruts, so thirsty that I tossed each pumped cupful straight down my throat. Okay, to be straight about it, I finished the Omahuta Forest Rd walk drinking desperately out of road puddles.

The road ended at a forestry work-site. I sat down and took a GPS reading. The size of the bush ridges all around was daunting, and I wanted to double-check before setting off on another bush-bash. South 35 degrees, 14 minutes, 2.03 seconds: East 173 degrees, 39 minutes 36.47 seconds - after the GPS reading I knew precisely where I was, but the niggle recurred as I plunged back into the bush - no-one else in the world knew. No matter. I broke out of bush again on the Mangapukahukahu Stream. So far, so good. No trails join the road access that stretches deep into the Omahuta Forest in an easterly direction with the Waipapa River Track that traverses the Puketi Forest on a north-south line. Yet at the point I entered the bush, they are separated by no more than three kilometres, and most of that distance can be done down the Mangapukahukahu Stream bed. This route was part of Te Araroa's plan to connect up the forests, and so far it was proving easy.

The Leki sticks! When you're crossing and recrossing a stream, and trying to keep your feet dry, what

balances you best on that slippery rock that protrudes above the rushing water, and what supports you, without the usual teetering and petty panic, while you take the time to choose your next stepping stone? Lekis do. It was a natural environment for them and all the way down the Mangapukahukahu Stream we prospered together. The feet got wet finally of course. I was standing on a rock, needing to take a very long stride over a deep pool that shoaled upwards to shallow water beside the stream bank. I plumped a Leki into the pool's sediment slope, leaned onto it, and began to transfer my weight across. The stick slowly sank beneath that weight, lowering me in helpless slow-mo into the pool. I pulled the stick up, expecting it to be half stuck in sediment, but it jerked willingly from the water and revealed itself neatly telescoped to half-size. It was apparently my fault - I hadn't sufficiently tightened the tapered interlocking sleeves against each other and they'd slid one into another under my weight - but it was such a neat revenge for the humiliation I'd subjected the poles to on Ninety Mile Beach that I held up the offender and looked at it a long time, waiting for any hint of an incriminating smirk.



I rounded a bend finally onto the Mangapukahukahu's junction with the Waipapa River. I forded the river and set up camp, cooking up two packets of the mandatory two-minute noodles. I swam. I lay on the river's sloping shingle bank drying and watching evening fall. Everything was fairly right with the world.

My anxiety about being able to cross the Waipapa River was over - I'd simply done it. The big orange triangle nailed to a tree over my head had stilled a second anxiety - I'd made landfall exactly where planned, on the Waipapa River Track. That meant all the bushbashing was over, and although I wasn't familiar with the track, I was now sure I'd make the Christmas Eve rendezvous the following night. To finally gloss these satisfactions, I needed only, amidst the various birdcalls of dusk, to hear New Zealand's greatest living songbird, the kokako. For I had now crossed into the fourth forest - Puketi - and a number of rare kokako are known to live within it.

## #11 Bush Christmas

*Te Araroa completes its four-forest crossing, and all its Christmases come at once*

The trail was the river. After a short track section on the river bank, the DOC sign simply pointed riverward, and with a Leki in hand to stabilise myself I set off that morning wading up the Waipapa River.

It was a quiet, wet, walk, pushing forward through clear water on a summer's day with bush all around, the river murmuring and throwing dappled light up onto the trees and ferns.

Sometimes the river fell into deep pools. Wetness as far as the crotch, okay, but armpit wetness - no, and where the pool continued to shoal downward and the water rose until it touched the bottom of the pack, I turned back and climbed the bank into riverside bush, sometimes finding a rough trail where other trampers had diverted, and sometimes finding my own way through.

The day went on. The bush was a narrow serpentine corridor, wallpapered in the ascending, entwined patterns of green flock. And so tiny upon the liquid floor below that he seemed not to move but to be poised always in the moment of leaning forward on his Leki, the last bend of the corridor always just behind, and the next bend always just in front, was the tramper.

I will not bore you with such delights. After a time, everyone wants an end to delight - and so did I. After a time I wanted to quit the river. I became impatient. Christmas eve, then Christmas itself. I had people to see and presents from the road to distribute - a kitchen knife with a ti-tree handle made by Peter Griffiths, the hair of a Herekino wild pig, a giant kauri snail shell, a couple of brass bullet cartridges, interesting stones, they were all there, in the pack. Santa was on his way, and does Santa wade slowly toward C-day in thigh-deep water? He does not. They give him a sleigh that cleaves the air itself.

And when finally the DOC arrow pointed up the bank again, I hoisted myself up face to face with a sign that said, "Forestry Headquarters" - with one bold directional arrow. That simply fanned a days-ago voice on the mobile that had said. "We'll meet you Christmas Eve at the Puketi Forest Headquarters campground."



Impatience - it was a spoiler, it was a determination to reach a goal before the sometimes clumsy processes of its realisation had been met: the Waipapa River walk on this upper track curves slowly round to its headquarter destination, is well-kept and it is one DOC can be proud of. I photographed a lot of solid kauri moments, I glimpsed powerful ridges, and heard birdsong. I should have been happy upon it, but my mind was impatient.

Coming on home. The last stretch. No more than eight kilometres, but it was miniature razorback territory. For every ten metres forward I seemed to go five metres down, hanging onto roots, splashing a stream, and five metres up again. I got closer, but I'd begun to flag. Routed signs covered in black fungus, relayed a repetitive message - "Forestry Headquarters" - but without indication of distance. The sun set, and I was still following orange triangles and searching the wayside trees for any sign of campground grass beyond. I called out, and the sound damped and died in the forest. I had sufficient experience to know that

whenever a bush tramp ends after a long day, there's always a final pinch at the end. I knew I hadn't done the last pinch yet, and as the trail climbed the ridge and thinned into manuka, I rounded a bend, and saw it there, stretching away steeply in front.

Done it. But then there was another. And after that another. At one point I took the pack off, lay down beside it for a rest, and realised I could have gone to sleep. Dusk had fallen, and I still had half an ear out for that rare sound, the evening call of the kokako, recognisable they say, as the sweetest sound of the New Zealand bush. And then I heard it.

"Hallo-o-o-o!"

The sweetest sound of the New Zealand bush, distant but distinct. That female call.

"Hey! He-e-e-e-y!"

I almost deafened myself. That answering call of the male.

Miriam and Amos came on down the track, and took the pack. They led me into a campground with the kebabs ready to go on a campfire, and an old friend from Kerikeri, Richard Mecredy, busy about the fire, pushed a can of beer into my hand.

I remember the cherries, the olives, the black espresso beans in their dark chocolate straight off Ponsonby Ridge, toasted marshmallows, platters of cheese, cake, and later that night, as Miriam and I climbed into a bigger, roomier tent than I'd been used to, I recalled in my mind teasing Peter Griffiths.

"This forester of yours," I'd said. "Terrific sexual prowess of course."

"Tremendous endurance," Griffiths had replied. "As hard as wood."

So it was. I had crossed the four forests, and in my own book was an honorary forester at least, with the attributes of a Forester, Bushman First Class. And then I fell asleep.

Next day was Christmas and the celebrations continued. Miriam spread out the food and drink, we pulled crackers, swapped gifts, and we flushed from his tunnel tent the solitary camper in the next bay, who brought with him the one thing that had been missing from our Christmas lineup of food and drink.



Scott Johnson banged down a foil packet of fine ground Café Aurora Medaglia D'Oro Italian Style - coffee.

"I do have Scotch, if you prefer."

No, sweet fate! Coffee, if he knew how I'd missed it. And as I boiled water on camping gaz, you could pick he was a serious trumper.

"You'll need to put a lid on that pot."

Then, after the water boiled and I whipped it away, entirely focused on getting handfuls of the black gold



into the pot before it stopped roll-boiling - "I'll just turn that flame off."

Sure enough, he'd done it. The very thing that had haunted me as I tramped alone, torn the anterior cruciate ligament during a hike through the Kahurangi National Park 18 months back, but walked out anyway, 18 kilometres over two days, continually pushing the ruined knee back into place as he went.

He tramped. He didn't approve of the mobile - though it had been beyond range most of the time - and the GPS. "I don't think you need this amount of technical equipment to walk through the bush. It detracts from the experience. Like me, with a metho stove instead of Ezigaz, though maybe it's because I just can't afford it. People think they've got to have all the gear, the polyprop and the polar fleece pants, but all you need is a pair of shorts, a T shirt, a decent pack and lightweight food, a compass, a good topo map, and bush skills and experience."

He was from Tasmania, but doing the Parks, Recreation and Tourism degree at Lincoln University. He had just come off Little Barrier Island, and was drifting up the coast in his yellow Toyota to see how the northerners lived. He'd been on the island for the past five weeks as part of his practical coursework, pulling introduced weeds out of New Zealand's premier bird and bush sanctuary. The weeding programme meant abseiling down cliff faces, or grid-searching the flats to find and pull the asparagus weed, the deadly nightshade, the Mexican Devil, the Pampas cerisia.

Or the new one - *cannabis sativa*. The Little Barrier drug bust of a few weeks before had touched a large number of people in the north. The DOC man I'd met a week before, Eddie Smith, had helped clean up the plot and had shown me on a map its Te Hue Point location, a cheekily short distance from the Boulder Bank, the island's only official landing place.

Then, the same day Peter Griffiths had dropped me off at the Diggers Valley Road, he'd collided with a car driven by one of the men charged with cultivation on the island.

Now there was Johnson: the police had pulled up the main plantation, a quarter-acre plot of around 3,000 plants some up to two metres high, but the weeders had come across another two small plots. Some story too about the men being surprised with bags of fertiliser under their arms - why? Uh - they just *loved* the trees on this island.



A German, Arne Asmussen, came across to ask about the local walks. He was a forester. He loved New Zealand bush - "but I'm a little bit sad about your commercial forestry, because you are planting a monoculture. In Germany we have tried this, but it attracts a pest that destroys the forest. And now we plant mixed forest: oaks and - I don't know the English names - *buche, erle, birke*. We start with fast-growing trees so the others are safe from the wind, but then we try to make the natural forestry work. And even if a tree is dead, you leave it where it is."

I told him my theory on why Germans come to New Zealand - to relocate their forest origins. Asmussen spread his hands. He had recently become unemployed in Germany. He was meeting his girlfriend here - such reasons, but then too: "In Germany you always know what lies over the next hill, but in this country . . ."

Amen to that. Right. Time, I said, for a bit of quality time with Amos. Cricket.

"Quality time? Cricket?" said Johnson.

"Absolutely. There is no reason why I should not deliver a Shane Warne flipper to my son and he should not successfully defend his castle," I said.

"You're a New Zealander and you can talk about successfully defending your castle?" said Johnson.

## #12 The Closed Walkway

*Bulls have horns, but the greatest threat to Te Araroa turns out to be public servants*



DOC's Puketi Forest noticeboard listed the forest walks, and was a dispiriting thing. Walk after walk was scratched through with a felt-tip, and the printed description of the walk over-written with the word "Closed". Two further walks had been over-written "Route only" - a technical term indicating the track had virtually disappeared and advanced tramping skills, use of a compass and a topo map, were now required.

DOC was abandoning many of its trails. Twenty metres away from the noticeboard, lay a pile of uprooted track signs.

But my immediate problem now that the family had gone was to complete the ocean-to-ocean Ahipara-Kerikeri walk. The four virtually interconnected forests I had walked from Ahipara now gave way to privately owned farmland. Kerikeri was now only 18 kilometres distant by direct route across that farmland, or by the mainly metalled back-country roads the distance was some 25 kilometres.

Aside from the roads, and aside from the last four kilometres where a DOC track led from Rainbow Falls down the Kerikeri River to exit near the Old Stone Store, there was no public walking access over that 18-kilometre stretch.

If you were to wave a wand over this 18 kilometres of farmland between Puketi Forest and Kerikeri, and wish up the best route through, the wand would touch, of course, the highest farmland hill, and offer up, with a swirl of glitter, a magical view of the Bay of Islands, then descend to the other obvious trail determinant, the Kerikeri River, tracing it downward until it joined with the final 4 kilometres of DOC river trail.

Oddly enough, a trail did exist that pretty much matched that wish-list. When researching the continuous trail route for Te Araroa Trust, I'd found it on the topo maps, and I'd rung DOC.

No, I'd been told then. That was the old Kerikeri walkway, but it had been closed for years. There'd been a problem with the farmer and his bulls.

Bulls - who cares about bulls? The trail was too perfect not to give it a try. I rang ahead to the farmer.

Julie Wright answered the phone and I asked permission to walk. I expected a refusal, but she seemed quite open to the idea.

"It's pretty overgrown in places, but someone did walk down a few weeks ago," she said. "There shouldn't be a problem - there's a few mobs of stock with bulls in them, watch that, and if you get lost, our farm is

centrally raced where we run the stock through, and you're welcome to use those races."

I pushed my luck a little further. I explained Te Araroa - it was the first attempt to find a pathway through New Zealand, we were testing the route etc, the closed walkway lay right on our track, and our trust would probably seek to re-open it - to the overseas backpackers, New Zealand trampers, the lot.

"Okay," she sounded interested. "I'll call Murray. He's down in the shed."

Murray Wright came on the line, and I explained Te Araroa.

"When the walkway was open, I enjoyed the people, no two ways about that." said Wright. "I met Germans and Swiss, and all sorts of people. I'm a keen fan of native bush and people getting out into the countryside.

"But when the government brought in the OSH legislation seven or eight years ago, everything changed. It made me liable for the safety of walkers on my farm."

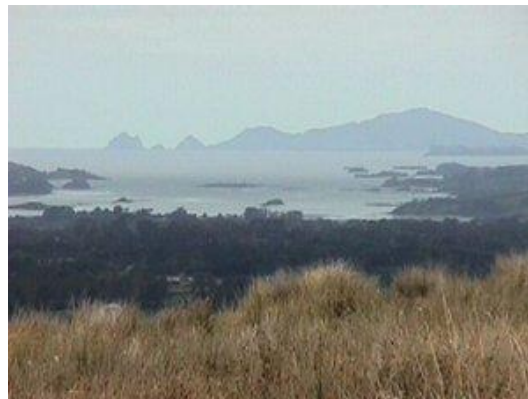
Wright was talking of the Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992, which made every employer responsible for the safety of their workplace.

A farm was a workplace, so the farmer was responsible for safety on the whole property. The Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) regulations, drafted under that act, threatened fines of tens of thousands of dollars where preventable injury occurred. Farmers became cautious about letting anyone on their land and the HSE Act and its regulations had effectively killed walkways across the farms.

"I became quite hard-nosed about public access," said Wright. "I farm bulls, and there was risk. I was not going to bear that risk. Before the walkway closed I talked with someone in Wellington who wanted me to carry round signs warning where I was putting the bulls. I mean - these people don't live in the real world. I don't expect to get back to people coming across my land unless I have it in writing from the government that I carry no liability for the walkers."

"The public servants think up these grand ideas to protect the public but what they're doing is making babies of the public, and the public are not babies."

I came down by road from Puketi, and found the entrance to the closed trail. It was a clay track through grass and tussock, crossing at its beginning, a Landcorp sheep farm. I climbed old stiles, their stanchions still erect, then climbed to the trig point and sat gazing at the glittering visual sweep over the Bay of Islands.





I crossed onto the Wright farm, diverted round a paddock that looked from a distance to contain bulls, lost the trail and crashed through two bush-filled gullies, before finding the old trail posts again, their inset walkway logos covered with lichen. They led to an overgrown bridge and I pushed across.



A startled pheasant rose so quickly from the riverside grass beyond that she crashed into fencewire, reeled back, then took flight. Paradise ducks flew from the river to divert the intruder from their chicks, and white-arsed pukekos ran springily away through the long grass. The river was just a few metres wide here, moving quietly along through pools.



Inquisitive cows closed around me in a semicircle of twitching ears, liquid brown eyes and wet snouts. I left the cow paddock, and entered a field of steers. The steers tossed their horns. They followed closely behind as I crossed their patch. I kept turning to face them, and once, when I turned, caught one of them showing off with a short, horns-down charge on the intruder. But it was a mock charge, I didn't feel threatened, and Murray Wright was correct. The public are not babies, and there is an instinctive side to ourselves that gauges animal behavior, and can separate what's hair-raisingly dangerous - I would have waded the river to avoid it - from what requires only wariness.

Why, with individual responsibility so much the nub of the new politics, does the Government insist on transferring a tramper's risk to a farmer? It makes no sense, and if a continuous trail is to be set in place through New Zealand, the OSH regulations as they apply to farmers generous enough to allow public access across their land will have to be struck out.

I road-walked the next section to Rainbow Falls, then went down DOC's riverside bush trail to Kerikeri.

The Department has done this one beautifully, and near its end, the door open to trail-users, is a tall corrugated-iron shed preserving 1930s history - the original penstock, turbine and generator that brought electric power to Kerikeri. I found the green cast-iron casings at least as interesting as the relics elsewhere of Kerikeri as one of New Zealand's oldest settlements, Samuel Marsden preaching the first sermon here in 1815, the early colonial architecture, Kemp Cottage, the Old Stone Store etc.

I reached Kerikeri Inlet and climbed the hill to Kerikeri township. It doesn't do to look behind you on a long walk, but when I did on this last stretch I'd seen not just the steer swinging his horns but something a good deal more disturbing. The walking trails seemed to be closing up behind me.

I walked into the Visitors Information Centre at Kerikeri. Was there, I enquired, any off-road walk to Waitangi? No, they didn't think so. I walked on down Cobham Drive, then Inlet Road. I was feeling good, spending a dollar at a roadside stall for two avocado, peeling the stiff skins, and eating them down to the stone. I sucked juice from a huge lemon that had rolled out of the citrus orchards onto the roadside verge, and I noted that in Kerikeri, even in these rural outskirts, everyone mows the grass between their boundary trees and the road. Kerikeri is that sort of tidy-minded place, it's good and safe for walking, and I strode along eagerly now for this was my first time back here since 1995 and I had something I wanted to see.

A maori youth and a young pakeha woman and their two kuri came up the wide verge towards me.

- Were they locals?

- Yeah, sort of.

- Could I get through to Waitangi from this no-exit road?

- They didn't think so - then the maori youth had second thoughts.

"Through the forest - yes. Just past the Okura River, there's a way in - I did it once on a bike"

"That's a long way, to Waitangi," said the girl.

"Yeah, it's a good walk but though," said her companion.

That was better. Of course there was a track from Kerikeri to Waitangi. If DOC was closing up its walks, and if OSH had closed the private trails, and if this was also an out-of-doors country that liked its access, then the law of small-c conservation must kick in sometime. For every walkway closed another must spring open.

Of course there was a track from Kerikeri to Waitangi. In February 1995, I'd put the thing through myself.

## The North - Section 3: Kerikeri - Whangarei

### #13 Kerikeri – Waitangi

*How Jim Bolger, tramper, became embroiled in Te Araroa*

Te Araroa Trust is, in its brighter moments, a mighty engine. It is a bunch of [six individuals](#) who have taken over where the now defunct NZ Walkways Commission left off in the 1980s, getting a New Zealand foot trail into place.

Some of the trust members have that 1000-yard stare, the look that pragmatists dread, the one that focuses beyond the practical problems onto a big idea. But the trust gets things done nonetheless. From its beginning in August 1994, we sought a good launch for the project, and in early January 1995, word came through that the keen tramper, Jim Bolger, liked Te Araroa. If we could find him a track to open, he'd launch it.

Let me say that again. Jim Bolger would launch our project. Let me also say, in passing, that we do domain analysis on this web site, and we know we have a keen reader in Estonia. Greetings: we hope you enjoy the pictures, we apologise for the lack of Cyrillic script, and for you alone, who may not know him, we will fully identify the man Bolger. In 1995, Jim Bolger was the New Zealand Prime Minister.

Bolger's decision filled us with catapulting hope. It was easy to suppose that if the New Zealand Prime Minister launched Te Araroa, the idea might start to fly.

But first, find your trail. We needed a trail with sufficient mana. We needed a trail that would fit Te Araroa's goal of a New Zealand songline, but we had no track, nor enough money to lay a track. Also, time was short. The Prime Minister would be going to Waitangi with the Governor General on the annual pilgrimage that commemorates the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi between Maori chiefs and the British Crown on February 6, 1840. But the PM's diary was rapidly closing up and he was available only a day before or a day after that commemoration.

Te Araroa is, in its brightest moments, a mighty engine. Trust chairman Bob Harvey and vice-chairman Peter Grayburn had done the work to secure Bolger. Now a group of us - John Bould, Ray Stroud, David Beattie and I - huddled over topo maps of Northland.

I think it was John Bould who noted that a DOC walkway already existed down the last four kilometres of river to Kerikeri. Then another walkway stretched from Waitangi to Opuia. Between those two places, Kerikeri and Waitangi, the map showed forest. If we could put a foot trail across that forest, Te Araroa would achieve something quite powerful. We would have linked the Kerikeri River walk to the north of the forest with the Waitangi-Opuia track to the south of the forest into a continuous stretch of north-south walkway. Such a trail also would connect two of New Zealand's most potent historical sites, Waitangi and Kerikeri.

I put the proposition to Harvey next day.

"Great. Let's do it," he said. "Let's go."

I went north and explored. Simple: the roads through the forest would be our track. They were safe, for traffic densities were very low, and only needed signage, so that walkers in the forest knew the distances,

and which roads to take.

Oh - and permission. I rang the forest managers, Rayonier New Zealand, and was told that the only man who could make that decision was the Northland boss, Harold Corbett. He was on holiday. I rang his home, but there was no reply.

These were the halcyon days of summer. We had a Prime Minister on the hook, I was in constant touch with his press secretary Richard Griffin, and they were the days when the mobile ran hot as a tarsealed road. I booked the PM for February 7. I hadn't done the final groundwork, but I figured we could always cancel.

At the time I was CEO of Te Araroa Trust, but the money wasn't big, so I'd taken a half-time job with Auckland DOC, figuring that might be useful to knit DOC into the trail idea. When the NZWC folded up in 1989, DOC had taken over all walkway functions, including administration of the New Zealand Walkways Act. The act was there to encourage trail formation. DOC could hardly do anything else but support the trail, and it did - I had it from the director-general of DOC Bill Mansfield - support it, the words were, *in principle*. But DOC had also been careful to hedge itself against any actual active participation.

The mobile shrilled, and I fielded the call as I walked past Pigeon Park on the corner of Symonds Street and Karangahape Road in Auckland.

"Geoff - it's Denis Marshall here."

Ye Christ! My boss. The Minister of Conservation.

"I'm not sure you're doing the right thing with this Te Araroa opening at Waitangi."

That was a shock. I went over and sat on a park bench.

"Oh? Why's that Denis?"

The mobile phone was then still a showoff kind of accessory and it was still *de rigueur* to shout into the little post-modern horn, to make decisive hand-gestures and name the names that count.

As that type of mobile phone call goes, this was about the best I ever did. It lacked only the fourth essential, an awed audience, and as if on cue the Auckland television director George Andrews strolled by, saw me, and diverted across. The Minister was still making his case for Te Araroa to proceed circumspectly, to get something a little more solid into place before launching itself - ie, I remember thinking to myself, never - and I put a thumb over the voice mike and mouthed at George.

"It's the Minister of Conservation, being difficult."

"Look Denis," I said, "the Prime Minister has said yes to this thing."

"Maybe, but you know the Prime Minister," said the voice on the other end of the line. "He'll say yes to anything."

"So far as I'm concerned Denis," I said, "the Prime Minister has said he wants to go on this thing. And if the Prime Minister wants to go, then I want to go."

George Andrews is a sophisticated man with hooded eyes, but the eyes had bugged a little by the time I

snapped the mobile closed.

"Just what are you up to Chapple?" he said.

Well, ripping up to Kerikeri to Harold Corbett's house. I'd stake the place out if necessary. Doorstop the forest chief, but when I came down the long drive I found him working in his garage. I introduced myself and explained Te Araroa in general terms, then made the pitch.

"Look, I know you're on holiday, but I've got an emergency."

"Yeah. Go."

"We've got a prime minister that wants to launch the concept. He needs a trail. We're looking at Waitangi Forest. We'd like Rayonier to allow the public access through, and we'll do the signage."

"I thought you said an emergency situation," said Corbett.

"Absolutely. The PM's only available on February 7, that's just two and a half weeks out, and we'd have to get everything in place by then."

"An emergency." said Corbett. "I'm on holiday but I respond to emergency. An emergency is a forest fire and a forestry worker with two broken legs trying to haul himself clear of the flames."

"But the Prime Minister -"

"It's not an emergency," said Corbett. "I'll be back at work in a week - ring me then."

More pressure. All the deadlines were closing in, but when I rang a week later, Corbett said he was keen. I got the signs done and hired an Irish backpacker out of the Kerikeri Youth Hostel to help dig the holes and pour the concrete. I got Roadmarks New Zealand to die-stamp a dozen long white plastic markers with the Te Araroa logo and dug them into the road junctions.

I had the plaque cast, with a bit of A.R.D Fairburn poetry. It was set into rock at the Rayonier forest boundary on Te Puke Road, and alongside it, Kerikeri sculptor Chris Booth poured a solid concrete base, and put up a cairn made from the local volcanic rock.



Waitangi Day 1995 blew up in the government's face. On the Treaty ground, Jim Bolger spoke and was shouted down by angry Maori. The New Zealand flag was cast in the dirt and trampled. The flag of Maori sovereignty was hoisted on the Treaty Ground flagpole. Someone spat in the face of the Governor General, Dame Cath Tizard, and another at her feet. It was all over the 6 o'clock news. That evening the country turmoiled. Maori elders went into conclave on Te Tiriti o Waitangi Marae. Maori commentators went on air, some supporting some condemning the disruption.

Pakeha commentators seized on the Maori shout that had come off the treaty ground all day - tino rangatiratanga, Maori sovereignty - what did it mean? Citizens outraged at the insult to Dame Cath flooded the talkback shows.

The events of February 6, 1995 threatened to blow away the event of February 7, 1995, but the ship of state held steady. Next morning, early, I was on the mobile to Bolger's press secretary Richard Griffin. Yes, the opening was still on and the Prime Minister's party, staying at the Beachcomber motel just eight kilometres distant, would move out at 10 o'clock.

At 10 am I was in the forest, mobile to mobile with Richard Griffin, the reception oscillating in and out of range.

"ETA fifteen minutes. Yes, fine. My son Amos is down at the entrance gate to show you the way through, and the Maori challenge is ready to go."

There was a silence on the line. I raced back up the hill thinking the call was breaking up, but then Griffin came back.

"Did you say a Maori challenge?"

"Yep. Ready to go."

There was a silence, people murmuring off-line then:

"The Prime Minister," said Griffin, "is in no mood for a Maori challenge."

"What!" Sir Graham Latimer had already lined up the Tai Tokerau group, it was psyching itself up down below.

Another off-stage conflagration.

"There will be no Maori challenge, Geoff," said Griffin.

"No Maori challenge."

Bloody politics. I raced back down the hill. The guitars, the song - okay. But the brandished taiaha, and the wero - forget it. I still don't know how it was done, only that the Maori group agreed. The limos arrived, and out stepped Jim and Joan Bolger, Denis Marshall in a floppy hat, Sue James the mayor of the Far North District Council, and the chairman of the Auckland Regional Council, Phil Warren.

Sir Graham Latimer gave the mihi. Wilson Whineray and Bob Harvey welcomed the visitors, outlined the Trust's aims, and then Jim Bolger spoke. He spoke of the natural right of New Zealanders to walk their land, and then he started to spill. He talked of being tangata whenua too - he was born in New Zealand and there was no other place he could call home. He turned to the cairn and noted that although the stone was local, stainless steel wire from imported European sources held it together. The Prime Minister was angry that day and eloquent with it.

Then came the unforeseen: a sewage tanker with dripping pipes hanging off it and



some sloppy load for the forest oxidation ponds hove up the hill and ground slowly towards the official function. With a fixed smile I watched my treacherous brothers and sisters of the press swing their cameras round and zoom on the monster before it crashed its gears, backed up, and went off down Skyline road.

That night I waited for the TV news, ready for the cutaway to the sewage tanker and a bit of smart-arse scripting, but it hadn't occurred to me that there might be nothing at all. The Te Araroa opening was referred to in passing, but only to get to the Prime Minister's "I am Tangata Whenua too" speech. Then he'd been lined up and interviewed on the Waitangi Day repercussions. As he spoke, you could see the rocks of the cairn behind his head. Te Araroa had been turned into wallpaper.



Almost three years on from that day I came up to Te Araroa's northern entrance. Gorse half hid the sign. I sat down. Aha ! I sense it. After the description of that great stacked chord of state three years past, the reader wants a silence to ensue. Wants the bleak threnody of Ecclesiastes to begin: Vanity of vanities, all is vanity and a chasing after wind . . . I mean - gorse, right? But I refuse to admit anything except a slight nausea from overdosing on avocado. I booted down the gorse, hacked it with a stick. The sign came up as good as new and I photographed it.

I walked on. The tall pines I remembered on Te Wairoa Road had been harvested, replaced now by seedlings, and the view back across Kerikeri Inlet was new. The smell of pine resin was in the air, and further in the trees got bigger, with pungas and macrocarpa shading the path. I came up finally, near the walk's southern end, to the place where we'd all stood three years before.

The cairn, the plaque Jim Bolger had yanked a tarpaulin from to open the trail, were mute now. The long grass had sprouted, and nearby Rayonier had put up a no-entry sign, but it applied only to a new one-way traffic system for vehicles - the forest walk was as open as before, and if anything safer. Someone had strapped an epiphyte to the side of the cairn, and it was a little dry, but still growing. I plucked a punga frond and stuck it in the rock pile, following a ritual we'd begun at the opening when both Maori and pakeha bedecked the cairn with greenery.



Then I walked the road that from here follows the route of an old Maori trail from the vanished Okura and Te Puke villages, down into Waitangi.

## #14 The Treaty

*He iwi tahi tatou - we are one people, yeah, yeah*



### **Pou tangata inside Whare Runanga of Tiriti o Waitangi National Marae**

Tim Jackson, the Waitangi National Trust Board manager, accompanied me through the entrance foyer to New Zealand's most potent ground. Around 320 people come through these doors daily, and a dozen or so were already filing through to catch the audio-visual.

We halted beside the trust's souvenir stand.

"About 73% of that number are foreign visitors," said Jackson, and gestured at the stand, stocked, amongst the paua shell and greenstone items, with wooden patu and carved gods, "and they love wooden objects."

"Oh?" I said.

"Particularly the Germans."

"Ah," I said.

"That's right," said Jackson. "The Germans will pay \$1,200 or \$1,500 for a top quality wooden souvenir, and they'll pay that without haggling at all."

I went and watched the audio-visual. The commentary looked at history through Maori eyes. The arrival of a voyaging people, and for 800 years, on these the largest islands of their migration, the most intense development of Polynesian life on earth, in peace, and war, and then -



"When the white goblins came in their great canoes, it changed our lives forever. At first the strangers were few and their visits like a dream . . . "

The numbers compounded, so did the muskets, and bloody tribal raids where sometimes thousands, as a chilling Maori euphemism has it, were put to sleep. Living or trading amongst all that were the whalers, the sealers, the missionaries, the timber and flax merchants, the British settlers. In 1835, James Busby, Britain's first representative in New Zealand, organised the Northland chiefs into the 1835 declaration of New Zealand independence to stop designs on the country by various grandees. By then the so-called pakeha were up to 2000.

Commerce was booming, casual land sales ballooning, fights exploding, and in England the so-called New Zealand Company was hyping the New Zealand destination, and preparing large-scale settlement.

Britain took the next step. It annexed New Zealand, then sought a voluntary handover of sovereignty. Lieutenant-Governor William Hobson sailed into the Bay of Islands on January 30, 1840, and in combination with James Busby, drafted a treaty that was laid before the Northland chiefs, and other chiefs from as far down as Hauraki, on February 5 1840.

In its simple three articles, the chiefs would cede sovereignty to the British Crown, but in return be guaranteed their customary land, forests and fisheries, except in the case of willing sale. There would be just one buyer - the Crown. New Zealand would come under British protection, and all Maori be guaranteed the rights and privileges of British citizens.

Culture clash. The audio-visual was frank about Maori disagreement: chiefs like Rewa told Hobson to go back - those who signed, said Rewa, would be "reduced to the condition of slaves and compelled to break stones on the roads."

The audio-visual didn't say so, but it was a fairly accurate prophecy for what lay ahead. The pro-treaty chiefs prevailed. On February 6, Hobson gathered 46 signatures, saying to each chief: He iwi tahi tatou - now we are one people. Over the next few months British officials and missionaries gathered a further 466 signatures on facsimiles from around the country, and Britain declared sovereignty over New Zealand in October 1840.

I wandered out onto an aerial walkway that hung level with the punga canopy, went down the stairs, saw the great waka, the whare runanga, and Busby's house. It is true that a nation's first events, like childhood, mark it forever, It is true that the treaty was a working document for a time, and then it was not. It is true that as settler numbers increased, the Crown and its agencies conspired later to take land from Maori and the missionaries, assisted by parliamentary law, broke up Maori tradition. It is true the confiscations that followed war in the 1860s took huge land acreages. It is true that any attempt by Maori to protest at breaches of the treaty agreement were rendered useless in law by an 1877 court decision that declared the treaty a "simple nullity".

But it is also true that the treaty was, by degrees, restored.

In 1932, a British Governor General, Charles Bledisloe, rescued this land from

private subdivision and gifted it to the nation. In 1975, the country's most astute Maori politician, Matiu Rata, steered through the New Zealand parliament, an act establishing the Waitangi Tribunal. It was empowered only to deal with Maori land grievances occurring from that date, but in 1985 that mandate was extended to investigate Maori claims going back to 1840.

That, together with a land march on Parliament, action by the Maori Council and activist groups, was the revolution. The Tribunal had only the power of recommendation, but its reports were startlingly clear, and forced the Crown to negotiate with the tribes, and to enshrine the treaty. The Labour Government 1984-90 dismantled state power, and spun off government enterprises into commercial State Owned Enterprises before selling many to private enterprise, but in the legislation that made such process legal it wrote in treaty principles, and the courts began to turn those principles into case law victories for Maori.

I walked out of the Whare Runanga, and the Spirit of Adventure was out in the blue bay, its tall masts and rigging suggesting past things. The Treaty Ground, mown and spacious, fell away to its own rounded horizon like some small grassy planet. A tall flag-staff marked the place of the treaty signing, and a Maori workman was right there, binding a cleat onto one of the flagstaff's steel guy ropes.



Yogi Takimoana was Ngapuhi. His family had scattered south, but he'd been back in the tribal area for 15 years.

He was preparing for the treaty commemoration on February 6. Binding the cleat, but if you wanted his personal thoughts on the thing, he wanted less speeches at the commemoration and more performance.

"Yeah, a full-on Maori day, for our people. Like 1990, that was more or less the coming of age. It was good time Maori performance. We put 75,000 seats up here and they were all full. We had the Mungies sitting down with Black Power laughing and just getting on with life - all the bros, for why? It was Maori pride.

"The pride is coming back. That negative look, it doesn't happen any more. I mean pakeha, but Maori too. Oh it used to be full on man, and that's why that pub down there was called the flying jug. When I first came back it used to be like, don't look sideways - *I'll come over there and whack you on the nose*. Now it's more - Giddyay Kiwi - it's that hello feeling.

"How good it is now that you never see Maori kids outside a pub now - have you noticed that in your travels? The kids hanging out the window of the cars eating chippies and calling for mum. You don't see it.

"There's less yelling, less swearing, less violence."

"The treaty? I'm pleased I'm a kiwi, and not an aborigine, and not an Indian. Why?"

Because their treaty has been around a lot longer than 158 years, but this treaty hasn't run away. And the pakeha - their vision of life is a lot more wider than it was.

We're all one, we're all kiwis, we all live together."

I walked on, across Waitangi Bridge. That phrase of all being one people. The audio-visual had closed with the same thing. Personally I don't believe it. In 1980 I was in a pakeha contingent, including Gary McCormick and Sam Hunt, to represent New Zealand at the South Pacific Festival of the Arts in Papua New Guinea. All the pakeha, for political reasons, had been sent to Coventry by the Maori performance groups selected for the same festival.

It was an unhappy experience, and I'd written a newspaper piece asserting the rights of pakeha in a South Pacific festival. Pat Hohepa, then leader of the radical group Ahi Kaa, wrote back to the editor saying: "Unless Mr Chapple is a member of the patupaiarehe, the red-haired, watery-eyed, pale-skinned fairies said to inhabit the forested uplands, he is not part of the indigenous people of this country."

I dwell too long on all of this - perhaps. But Te Araroa's idea from the outset was that the trail would bring to view not just the landscapes, but the history, and the people. We proposed that the walker on the trail might be manuhiri, or guest, within a tribal area, and if the walker was lucky, fetch up a night or two at a marae. It is a different culture. Its karanga and powhiri can stir you with a spirit that is not easily found elsewhere in this country, and I think its power arises from the community of the tribe, and because the forms are old, and often conducted by the old, and full of the secrets and dreads that are locked within the land.

Te Araroa has had some Maori support, and it has required a generosity and confidence beyond the grievances.

Yet no-one walking in Northland and seeing the shacks, the black economy of dope and subsistence hunting, the sliding, desperately driven cars on the road, can say that the rage has died, or the opportunities yet come.

I walked along the grass esplanade towards Paihia. To my right was the Tiriti o Waitangi Marae. It was on this ground that the chiefs first met and argued before going on across the river to sign the treaty. It's on this ground, since 1875, that Maori have met on the anniversary to discuss Pakeha infractions of the treaty. There is a line of tall Maori carvings stuck in the ground here that are more thin, more angry, than anything up on the treaty ground, where the carvers were - I'm guessing - funded by centennial celebrations money. Narrow-shouldered, and with swooping arms, this other line of squiggles seem to have walked out of an earlier time, a far scarier place.

To the left of the esplanade, New Zealand was at play. The cars were drawn up, iridescent and glinting, the sunbathers were oiled and lying prone on the beach. Left or right, I belonged to neither group. I pushed my sunnies firmly back onto the bridge of my nose and walked on.

## #15 The Inlet

*Say it with Tim Tams - Paihia, Opua, and the Russell State Forest*

Tourist craft waited at Paihia to whisk you anywhere, and lighten your wallet. Mack Attack with its turbo-charged 2,600 horse power Mack truck engines, or the Exitor with its twin 6.5 litre V8s could power you up to the Hole in the Rock at Cape Brett and back in 1 hour 30 minutes. Dolphin Discoveries could find you the porpoise packs, set you swimming amongst the creatures, and re-play underwater video footage of your mystical experience on the way back home. If you wanted to hook marlin, mako, or yellowfin tuna, the deep sea fishing charters left from here. The Fullers ferry could take you across to Russell, the original Hellhole of the Pacific, and you could join the historical tour, see church walls scarred by bullets from the Maori sacking of the place 154 years back, and the hill where Hone Heke repeatedly cut down the flagstaff.

There was a whole lot else, glow worm caves, and vintage rail, and Ninety Mile Beach return trips, but I by-passed all the tourist slates, the arcades and restaurants, and went into the Paihia Four Square store. I bought enough food to last five days, because I wasn't sure about what lay ahead.

Or rather, I did know. You could see it from Paihia, the distant horizon to the south-east was olive drab and shaggy with bush - the Russell State Forest.

I'd driven round the outskirts of the forest once at night on the convoluted Russell Rd. That interminable vegetative darkness converging on my weak cone of light - I remembered it as disturbing. Now here it was again, far away beyond the bunting, the little cream finials of mock colonial architecture, and the casual happy crowds, but not that far. It was New Zealand's natural state, rolled back for this little space of fun, and maybe it was just the contrast, but the forest seemed psychotic, waiting, like the Maenad-headed stranger who accosts you coming out of supermarket with your trolley, and picks over your shopping:

"Tim tams. I see you've bought Tim Tams. I just love doing it to Tim Tams - I've got a class five dental occlusion - an overbite, see that? And when I smash my jaws down on a Tim Tam I can break it into three bits."

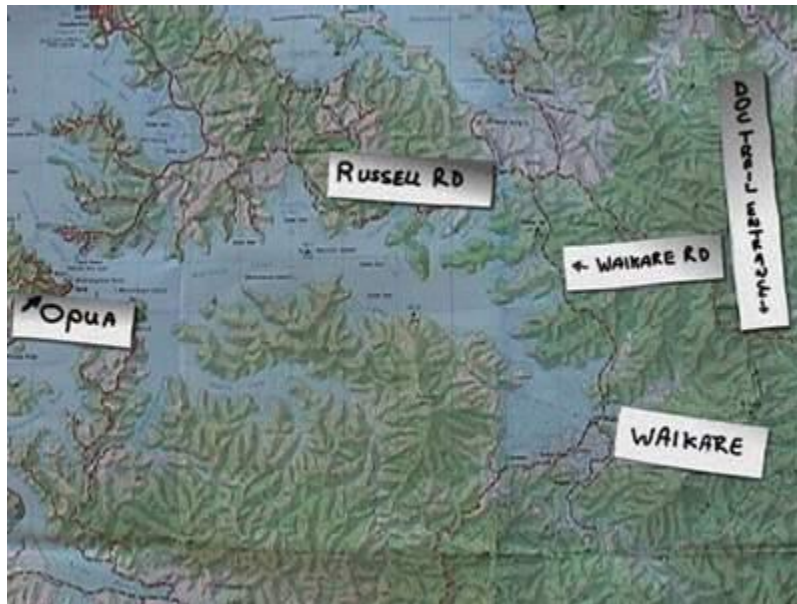
I was anxious about the forest, and, as I set out along the Paihia-Opua walkway, I was undecided about how to get into the forest. When designing the trail for Te Araroa Trust I'd marked a continuous overland tramp right through to Opua, then faced the long deep Waikare Inlet. What do you do when the trail hits water?



Well, you cross it. Fullers Opua ferry shuttled vehicles across 750 metres of water all day. You could board that, but the ferry set you ashore at the closest lobe on the eastern side of the inlet, and to get to the DOC trail entrance to the Russell Forest, a trumper would then need to follow the Russell Road some 20 kilometres.

## Opua waterfront

That was a sure option, and I wrote it into the report, but the roadwalk was long. In Auckland I'd pored over the topos and come up with a second option. Surely if you were going to cross water you may as well do it properly. Why not hire a little boat at Opua and go right up into the mangroves at the top of the inlet, step off at the little settlement of Waikare, and enter the forest from there? In that darkened computer room in Auckland, working with a magnifying glass on an old 1:25,000 map of the area, I'd found a 4WD track that led up from a Waikare back-road and followed the Papakauri Stream some distance. From there it seemed possible to keep following the stream up to link with the main DOC traverse.



Map of the Inlet

I'd taken that proposal to Northland DOC - was there a trail up Papakauri Stream? They didn't think so. And, they emphasized, the boundary of the Russell Forest fell whole kilometres short of Waikare so that I was proposing - the word came out with the emphasis of impossibility - a crossing of *private* property.

Well, I didn't have to decide - yet. The Paihia-Opua walkway was a pretty coastal track that followed the rocky shoreline awhile, then became a bush-shaded cliff and hillside path dipping occasionally to the beaches. DOC signs marked the route, but the path itself, including its rest-awhile seats, and a boardwalk across a mangrove swamp, was completed by community labour in 1988. Now, because of the cost of maintenance, DOC was talking about closing this track too.

I was out of scale here. This big pack and its dangling water bottle. The topo map tucked in the side. The boots. That was fine on Ninety Mile Beach and in the forests. Here, where you could buy ice creams by just nipping up the road, and where the holiday makers were propped back on their beach chairs sucking on tins, I looked wildly over-done. Other walkers kept coming down the trail towards me in jandals and open-necked shirts, and they gave this other with the great gobbo on its back an extravagantly wide berth.

The tameness of this coast, where the waves merely lapped, was also having its effect. This was a safe bit, and I wanted to keep playing it safe. Option one. Option one. Option two had too many fish-hooks. Hiring a small craft at Opua, getting through the mangroves, then past private property - it all seemed too difficult. And even then - the Papakauri Stream had become in my mind a steep cataract with great

boulders that forced you off it into deep bush, and there was the added worry that the stream might not precisely link with the main DOC traverse.

Option one, option one - it won the argument hands down, but by the time I reached Opuia, I knew it had to be option two. It was as simple as that, but it didn't make me happy.

I eased my way into Opuia by simply stopping strangers in the street and that didn't help.

"Waikare? There's a marae up there, but I'm not sure they'd want people poking around. There's quite a bit of the old wildwood flower in the hills there."

I stopped a yachting coming out of the Opuia Cruising Club, and he suggested talking to Ika Fisheries, an oyster farming company on Opuia wharf that took barges up the inlet. I knocked on Ika's door and one of the owners, Eddie Cook, was sitting at the table. Yes, it was possible to get up to Waikare, but only on the full tide which wouldn't recur until 3 p.m. tomorrow. Even then, you'd need a local. Pity, his cousin had been down just yesterday from Waikare and he'd have taken me up.

"But if you haven't solved it by tomorrow morning, come back and see me," said Cook.

There it was, a catalogue of difficulties and, at best, delays. I sat down on a shopfront bench. All the cars that queue for the Opuia ferry have nothing to do but stare at whatever's new on the local scene and that was me, eating a fascinating hamburger. Evening was coming on. "No Camping" signs were posted everywhere. I walked up the hill looking for a bed and breakfast or a motel, but everyone was full. The rest area at the top of the hill had the same no camping signs nailed up, but a good perimeter of trees. I pitched the tent there, crawled into the tunnel and zipped up the flaps on the entire world.

Funny though, that difference between the end of one day and the beginning of the next. I was down at Ika Fisheries early, and Eddie Cook got things moving. Ray Reihana had just changed the plugs on a Honda four-stroke outboard that powered one of the oyster barges, and wanted to test it. He'd take me about half-way up the inlet, and I could pick up the Russell Road, then turn down Waikare Road.

Four Maori partners ran Ika Fisheries. Three years ago they'd banded together, Ray out of forestry, Eddie a crane driver, another partner straight off the dole, and the fourth a rock sculptor. They'd gone to the bank and got a stake of \$26,000. The first year the operation was \$17,000 in the black, and now they planned to expand into Whangarei, into plant and offices that could handle not just the annual harvest and washing of 120,000 oysters, but the whole processing sequence, right through to restaurant distribution - "we're cutting out the middle man."

It was Maori industry. It was successful industry.

"That's right," said Reihana. "You can't keep looking behind you. You've got to keep looking forward."





**Ray Reihana**

Reihana dropped me at a beach, and I walked round to Waikare. I went up past the school into a Maori valley with stereo music echoing, and Maori farmers charging to and fro on their quads. Every time I stopped and asked, I was encouraged forward. I went up the 4WD track, and then I left the farms behind. The stream walk was the prettiest and easiest of my journey so far. Sapling bush was all around, sparse and winnowy, and whenever I had to leave the stream I found a trodden trail.

The young totara had a single mission here - a bit like those diagrams that show the disproportionate nervous sensitivity of the human body with every other body part overshadowed by gigantic thumbs. No matter how slender its trunk, every young totara had a single huge branch stretched out over the stream, gathering sunlight.



**Papakauri Stream**

The Papakauri stream had everything. I swam beneath its overhanging bush, and dried off on its stones. I saw its reflections, its pools, its strewn rocks that made it look sometimes like a Japanese stone garden. Four hours in I crossed over one of its small rapids just downstream of a deep pool faced with two right-angled slabs of rock.

I heard a commotion behind me. I turned and saw his sinuous flick through the last of the shallows, into the deepening water. Gun-metal grey, a fat torso with two delicate shell-like fins shimmering, gelid eyes, and then the long body tapering away a metre or more. The eel just hung there, regarded me for a full ten seconds with as much intent as I regarded him, and then he glided slowly away into the grotto, and stowed himself under a rock shelf.

I went on up, and found the DOC traverse. Just 20 metres in from the stream was a DOC shelter, and I pitched camp in the evening, listening to the dusk chorus of tuis, their bustling through the trees, and later, in the darkness, the moreporks and the shriek of kiwis.

## #16 Russell Forest

*A forest without signs, and with track tags buried in the earth, tries to fox Te Araroa*



In the morning I awoke to the sound of a vehicle. A Mitsubishi twincab ute pulled into the clearing, and a DOC hunter got out and freed his little goat-tracking dog from a pen on the back.

Sean Gardiner came across and we had a chat about my route. I told him I'd just come up the Papakauri Stream, without difficulty.

"Right - that's a brill track.

### Sean Gardiner

Trust the goat hunters. They knew the tracks probably better than anyone else in DOC. Gardiner loved trails, but he was seeing them regress, and seeing them confused by the tags left by possum hunters, kokako spotters and other workers in the bush. I'd faced the problem myself at the Waipapa River and even coming up Papakauri. Sometimes a line of tags led away from the river and you found yourself inclined to follow it. False trails.

"Yeah. The tags are a problem. Pink for possums. Blue for kokako. I've been into Waipoua lately and I was hitting all types of tag. Pink, blue, spray marks of different colours. It gets you confused."

The problem I suggested, was not the tags, but that the main trails themselves were becoming so indistinct that you were inclined to seize on tags and follow them..

"Yeah. We used to use the trails for hunting, to get through quickly, but now most of them are so overgrown it's better to make your own way through."

Still, the trail we were on was clear enough. A grassed 4WD track I'd follow for around two hours to Mt Monoa, the highest point in the forest, then branch east off it, down the Russell track to exit at the back of Mokau Bay. That was the plan. The main traverse, and the side track were clearly marked on the topo, and on a DOC pamphlet I was carrying.

"Okay," said Gardiner, "Now you can't get to the Monoa summit, that side-track is closed, but you'll go past it pretty close to the top. You'll recognise the spot, the track is terraced there, and you'll be able to see Pukemoremore, it's a big bald rock to the south-west. The track goes down a saddle towards Pukemoremore, it's a big dip, then it climbs. You'll need to watch closely for the start of the Russell track."

"Why?" I said. In my mind I'd done all I had to do on the forest's informal tracks. In my mind I now had only to follow clear signposts through and out of it.

"The start of the track is a bit shabby," said Gardiner. "If you like I can run you up and show you exactly where you go in."

I said no - it was better to keep the walk fresh, but I was interested that the entrance to a major side trail



had suddenly become so hard to find. Then I realised just what I was being told. I remembered looking at the posts alongside this DOC shelter last night and that they'd struck me as strange. Bare posts, without signage.

"The entrance to the Russell track is signed though," I said.

"No," said Gardiner. "There might be a post still up, or a hole where the post has been, but we've taken the signs down."

"Mt Monoa is signed?"

"No."

"You've taken the signs down on this track too."

"That's right. People were getting lost, mostly over in the Monoa area. A lot of the tracks were getting overgrown, we don't have the money to maintain them, so we decided to close them. I pulled up a lot of the signs myself, two weeks before Christmas."

"Has it occurred to DOC," I said, "That if people were getting lost in a forest with signs, and you pull up the signs, they're going to get even more lost?"

"Yeah," said Gardiner, "you're better off talking to Clint McGee at the Russell Field Centre about the actual reasoning. I'm just one of the hands that has to do what he's told to do."

I watched him go off with the little terrier Gin casting around in front, and a .223 Ruger over his shoulder, and felt a flash of anger.

The anger was not with Gardiner - he'd been very good. I was grateful for his detailed advice. I knew that if I hadn't met him, I'd have gone merrily off that morning following a very straightforward main traverse. I knew that I would have walked it without close attention to the topo map, expecting the major features like Mt Monoa to be signposted, and the main side tracks too. I didn't have the GPS, and topo maps are fine while you're paying attention to every new ridge, but not when you try to pick up your position without previous reference. I suspected without that happy meeting with Gardiner I'd have lost my way in the Russell State Forest.

The anger was with DOC. It was spending money to eradicate the goats to regenerate the understorey to make a better forest that no-one finally would see. It didn't make sense. The shelter was maybe the last place in the forest to have any signage at all. It was covered in it - you know the sort - "Black Rulz", "Reality is just an illusion created by lack of alcohol", "Stefan and Anders from Sweden", and I vented my mood by carving in my own: "Te Araroa 8/1/98". Can DOC - or, to go one step up the chain, the Government that has underfunded DOC ever since its formation in 1989 - earmark enough money to keep open at least one tramping through route - please?



I followed the main trail and came up the side of Mt Monoa. You could see the forest from here, with its mighty ridges, and steep falls. I sighted Pukemoremore, and went on down the saddle. A single post still marked the beginning of the Russell Track, but you'd never have picked it otherwise. I took a compass bearing on my exit point a couple of kilometres to the south-east, and pushed uphill into the bush.

### **Russell Forest**

Shabby was the word. The trail was hard to follow, but I found an old red and white marker nailed to a tree, then another, and I searched for each one, and my eye was as pleased to see each one as if they'd been thimbles of water in a desert. They led on. Then they stopped but the trail was clear enough. It led on. It opened onto a gut-stopping view.

You couldn't see the precipice all around, but you could feel it. If there was any trail marker in front it would be hung on thin air. I went back to the last marker. The trail had to go sideways from there, and I cast about trying to see if the trail led away to the side. I went down precipitous slopes, hanging onto the vegetation to try to pick up the deviation. Nothing.

I sat down on the ridge, and took a long slug of water. The afternoon was drawing in - it always does when you're in trouble in the bush. I studied the terrain carefully against the map, and it was obvious that the Russell track must lead down the ridge that lay immediately east, and that there must be a cross-trail to pick it up. I went carefully back over the same ground I'd come, but could find no sign of it. Right - I'd just bushbash it. I chose a likely spot, and went in. I pushed through foliage, and there, half-buried in humus on the ground, was a trail marker.

From there the Russell track was easy enough to follow. The old markers were still in place. It was a steady descent with kauri and dracophyllum on the occasional knolls, and once, a view back to Pukemoremore.



**View back to Pukemoremore**

I looked back at the face. Before I'd figured there were two trails, I'd been dumbly determined that the single route must head off somewhere to the side of this summit. Casting around there, not knowing that even trail markers might suggestively lure you to the lip, it was one helluva long way down.

The Russell track had once been beautifully laid, with wooden risers chocked into the steeper bits. It was sad to see it being let go, but I was pleased finally to be down and out of it all. I went round to Mokau where I had arranged to rendezvous with Sean Gardiner next morning. Goat hunters like trails, and he'd offered to help me on the next leg of the journey by dropping off the next topo map in the series, one I hadn't been able to pick up in Paihia.

There was a marae, but no camping ground. The beach was Maori land, with small makeshift dwellings, collections of caravans providing the extra rooms, and horses wandering through, I knocked on the door of a house belonging to Willie and Cressida Williams.

Was there any place I could pitch a tent?

"How about under that pear tree," said Williams pointing into his own backyard.



**Horses all around in the dark**

That's what I did, and went to sleep finally with horses quietly whinnying and tearing the grass all around.

## #17 To Whangarei

*How Te Araroa gained a soda spring and a wall to wonder at*



The wind began to blow. It began at Helena Bay where I chanced upon a Mr Whippy, spent \$2 I'd found on the road, and watched the Sno-Freeze begin to distort and stream away north like sastrugi. The wind blew on the little used back-road up to Mimiwhangata, picking up road dust and hurling it in sheets against the clay bank, with such force that the stuff curled upwards, then over on itself, and I was walking through what surfers call the barrel.

Head down along Mimiwhangata Beach and all the bays beyond. By the time I walked into Whananaki, the wind was whipping the quiet estuary to a fury, and I was staggering sideways under the blast.

I took time out of the weather to write, then headed down the DOC walkway between Whananaki North and Matapouri. All the little bays, each one a cameo of a New Zealand camping holiday, except for the fact that the cyclone poised somewhere out in the Pacific was sending in swells that dumped the swimmers flailing onto the sand. The trail ran along an old coach trail. It hung just above the coast at what they call the cartographer's angle - about 35 degrees elevation - and all the pretty little bays and their tents were laid out like toys.

I'd started late and didn't reach Matapouri until 8 pm. I planned to walk the back country behind the Tutukaka Peninsula. The topo showed a trail of some kind leading through to Ngunguru, and I'd put it into the Te Araroa blueprint. It was getting late, but it was time to test it.



I walked up Clement Road to where the signs said: Council Maintenance Ends Here. You have to watch these private roads. The word in Northland is that you can get dogs loosed upon you because certain people, working in a certain industry, value their privacy. But this one had a notice tacked onto the bottom, welcoming horse-riders and walkers into the valley.

A woman called Mary Olsen stopped to offer me a lift. I couldn't take the lift, but I could take advice. I told

her my plan, and she told me where to go in, but didn't know the exact route through

I liked Mary. She didn't quail at the thought of finding a trail in the dark, saying merely:

"You've got the gear to spend the night out?"

"Yes, but I won't be," I said. "The moon is up at 10.30pm or so, and I'll just keep walking."

"If you do have to turn back," she said. "Just go up the road a way to Mamaki village, and ask for Ben Edgar. He knows how to get through."

I walked onto farmland. I found a small house under construction with an old Greenpeace banner keeping out the wind. It was hung upside down. Halt the Airstrip, it said. Non a la piste!

Mary Olsen wasn't sure, but she thought you turned left down a farm track here. That's what I did, and descended into a valley where a young pine forest was under way. In the dying light I took a compass bearing, and began following it, using the tracks that seemed to best suit the direction.

I crossed a swamp, then followed a steep mown access track through the pines. Night was falling fast now, and there was no moon yet. I climbed the ridge but found only a dense bushline, and no way through.

I turned and the pines were laid out below like a vast and silent crowd in an amphitheatre. From time to time on Te Araroa I attracted quite big audiences. Cows in particular were very good at rushing up and standing in an expectant semi-circle. I would thank them for gathering and make a pledge to do my bit towards rescinding Yahweh's ancient promise to mankind, of dominion over all the animals. But to the mute and dark pines I had nothing to say. It was time to turn back.

Back in the valley I was suddenly aware of big animals moving in the pine forest. One of them lumbered down and turned to face me, unmoving on the path. It was dark by now, and I couldn't see what it was. That famous ad for Uncle Ben's Rice where every grain salutes you: I felt every hair stand up. I remembered brave words I'd written about our own instinct, and knowing which animals were dangerous. I just had no idea about this one.

"Good boy!" I advanced, praying it was a girl. Every grain salutes you - that was understatement. This was the Nuremberg Rally. I moved up on it, and the beast finally turned and heaved back into the forest. I got back to the road finally, and went up to the end of it. I knocked on a lighted door, walked straight in at the casual invitation from inside, and asked for Ben Edgar.





**Ben Edgar**

"We had a German come through here - some sort of physicist who was analyzing New Zealand natural springs. He tested the water - it was kind of a rich brew, very good for you. And the story goes that Maori women and kids used to shelter there when there was a war - it was a kind of safe place."

Edgar penned me a map of how to get to the springs.

"Up the fenceline here, look out for a big Puriri, and then there's a stile to get you over the lekis."

"Over the Lekis!"

"The electric fencewires, then the bush trail is marked."



**Soda Spring**

"That's me."

Mistakes, failures, they are fruitful ground for progress. Edgar gave me clear instructions on the through trail to Ngunguru, and beyond that he was interested in Te Araroa's project. Te Wairoa Trust owned 160 acres of the valley, and the trustees were the sort of people who liked walking.

"I feel like we'd be interested in helping a national track along, but I'd have to take it to a meeting of the four trustees before taking it further."

In particular, said Edgar, the Te Wairoa farm gave access to a DOC-run Soda Springs reserve, that was presently little used and could be knitted into the trail...

A spring was just the kind of stop to make a trail interesting. I found it next morning, a big white silica dome in the bush. I drank the refreshingly effervescent soda water then retraced my steps a few hundred metres to the Greenpeace trail, and followed it through to Ngunguru.

A man wearing a boating cap was chewing the fat with the driver of a fizz-boat over some problem on the Ngunguru Spit. The spit was a natural asset for Ngunguru, sheltering the estuary on the seaward side, and for decades had provided a wide sandy playground.

But just now the spit was a hot issue. A developer had purchased much of it. There was talk of someone employed by the owner chasing people off the privately-owned bit. The developer was talking about a subdivision.

"It's not right," said Boat Cap. "It belongs to the whole community. DOC should buy it - trouble is, DOC would leave it just as it is. I'd like to see pohutukawas planted right along there.

"No, subdivision isn't the right thing," said Boat Cap thoughtfully. "Mind you - no-one should interfere with private property. You have to watch them. DOC, the Council, they can put so many restrictions on it that it becomes valueless, then they just buy it. He's got his rights, and if they took it off him - imagine the rates he's paying on that strip - all our rates would go up."

There was a confused pause, so I took the opportunity to ask the fizz-boat man if he could take me across to the spit.

"Sure - step in." Peter Raus and his craft Eze Going seemed quite pleased to get going, stern digging down, bow up, flat tack across the estuary. I walked to the base of the spit and onto Barney Mahunga's farm. I'd previously checked if I could come through, and explained Te Araroa, and I went up to the farmhouse to pay my respects.

Yes, Barney Mahunga still felt he'd be happy to have the trail mapped across his farm.

"The people who'd get in the way of something like that, they're just niggly buggers," said Mahunga. "I like it. I used to do a lot of that myself. Pig hunting in the forest. We used to ride the horses down that track you used from Whananaki North - all along there."

The spit ran straight off the Mahunga farm, and I asked him about it - it would surely have been Maori land once.

"Oh yes. It was a tapu place. We used to go there and camp as young fellas, but the old people said it was a tapu place. You'd be chasing rabbits and you'd come across a skeleton. The skeletons were always coming up - the wind would wipe away the sand, and there'd be another one. The old people said there'd been a big battle there, but I don't believe that. I think they just lived and died there."

"If it was a tapu place," I asked, "why was it sold?"

"They sold it in the 1930s," said Mahunga. "And I reckon the old people sold it to keep us off. They didn't like us going there at all."

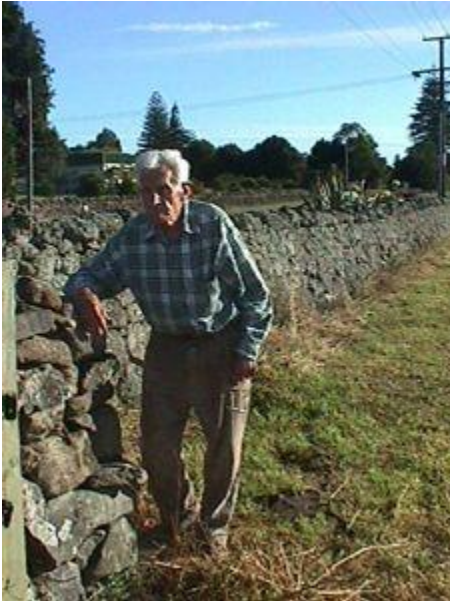
I went on up the private road, that turned in Ngunguru Ford Road and connected with the Whangarei-Tutukaka Highway about 10 kilometres out from the city. I spotted the Batman ears of Bream Head on the horizon. I was getting close to my first city, and it was Te Araroa's plan not to avoid the cities but to pass right through them. I also figured that a roadwalk coming into a city was probably unavoidable. There'd be footpaths to keep you safe, and a chance to replenish, and I'd chosen this road in because it was extraordinary. I joined the highway's whooshing traffic at about the point where drystone walls began to edge the highway. They ran back over undulating farm landscapes. There was something about drystone walls. Drystone walls with cows standing just beyond them - charming. Drystone walls and puriri trees overshadowing them - perfect. Drystone walls and agapanthus - how satisfying. Drystone walls and ivy . .

. well can anyone explain what it is about drystone walls?

I came across some workmen putting a drive entrance through one of the walls, carefully re-stacking the stone at each side, and asked the obvious.

"The Dallies made them," said one of the workmen. "way back in the 1930s."

"Or old Robert Johnson, he's still at it," said another. "He just lives up the road there."



**Robert Johnson**

When I called, Robert Johnson had just finished dinner with the former Hobson MP and Chairman of Committees in the Muldoon Government, Neil Austin. Austin was in a new house down the back of Robert Johnson's property, and Johnson was doing hands-on construction of the new stone walls curving down Austin's driveway, and the retaining wall for the haha in front of the house.

I went back to Johnson's house later, and heard the drystone story. The family was from Berkshire, then Oxford, in England. In the mid-1920s they'd arrived here to purchase a dairy farm, but Mrs Johnson hadn't liked the Cambridge one, preferring the rounded volcanic knolls of the Whangarei property.

Robert's 14-year-old heart sank. Mrs Johnson had the geomancer's right to choose the place that felt right for her, but the ground was covered with basalt rock, and it became Robert's job to clear it using an old Cletrac, and sometimes gelnignite, stacking the stones into boundary fences.

"How many walls have I built? Well, perhaps not that many - it wasn't my main job - four or five miles at the most."

"I didn't learn to do it, I just bloody well did it. It's fairly obvious. The big stones at the bottom - the butt stones - then the fill, what the Scots call "hearting" but this is a fairly prosaic country, it's fill - then the walls. People forget there are two sides to a wall and you have to build both sides. The most difficult bit is the jamb at the end. It's three-sided, and each side has to be right, but then you keep putting aside the stones that will be right for the jamb as you're building towards it. It usually works out."

He knew his rock. It had spurted out of the Kiripaka fault. The first sheet came out quickly, so it was bubbled and convoluted with the quick release of gas. Good for the fill, good interlocking rock for the sides, and the heavier bits were good for the coping stones that sat on the top and held the wall down.

Then the volcanic fault had delivered a second spurt that came out under the first sill, and took longer to cool. It was dense and heavy and produced good butt stone. It could also be split and faced, useful for



the jambs and for work more precise than the boundary fences on the farms.

Since giving up farming, Robert Johnson had taken up the wall building again. He was 87 and still at it, and the neighbourhood was dense with his work - not the long farm walls now so much as the garden grottoes, the ascending pergola mounds and a marriage celebrant's wall.

"It's so interesting you forget your woes, and I don't charge. That means if I have a disagreement, I can just walk away. People work with me and I can bully them if they make a mistake.

"It's what did you say? It's work that will last 1000 years? Well a macrocarpa tree in a high wind will move the ground so much the wall will just slump, and I don't believe that 1000-year stuff. I'll say this much: I said it once to a Brethren bloke who asked me why I didn't charge. "If you seek my reward, look around you." That was Christopher Wren's epitaph. I misquote it: I think it's "If you seek my memorial, look around you."



I left Robert Johnson, and walked on into Whangarei. Past the Whangarei Falls where the Maori kids were jumping from high up in a macrocarpa into the deep pool at the top of the waterfall. Then I went on down towards the city and diverted to find the A.H. Reed Memorial Kauri Park. Right there, putting the computer on the concrete pad that supports the the rock and a bronze plaque commemorating the family, I typed these words. And from that spot I sent this story. Remembering an earlier walker.

## The North - Section 4: Whangarei - Auckland

### #18 Mt Manaia

*Kim Hill tunes in a bit of Te Araroa chaos*

In Whangarei I bought a new collapsible water bottle, six extra tent pegs, and a second thermal T-shirt from Canoe and Camping. I sat down for a cup of espresso coffee - I mean, what are cities for? I set out for Whangarei Heads.

When planning the trail I'd been told that long-term the council would put a walking track out to the heads. There wasn't presently a track and the route required a bit of road-walking but I felt happy with it - there were footways tacked onto the bridges and a wide shoulder most of the way, esplanade strip along the beaches. It was a long way though, and I used the time to firm up the route ahead. I rang John Marple who ran a water taxi service across Whangarei Harbour's narrowest point, the 750-odd metres from Whangarei Heads to Marsden Point.

I explained I was on a Cape Reinga - Wellington walk. How much was his water taxi hire across the heads?

"The usual charge is \$40," said Marple. "For you, it's \$20.

"You'll climb Mt Manaia on your way through of course," said Marple, and the way he said it seemed like a condition of the \$20 cheapo fare.

"Mt Manaia - okay," I said, and finished that day in a caravan park halfway out to the heads.

In the morning, I stared at Mt Manaia, 100 metres higher, for those who measure such things, than Auckland's Sky Tower. The whole of Bream Head is a scribble of volcanic violence, but even amidst that craggy bunch, Manaia stood out and was visible far out to sea. It had four high standing pillars, one of them tilted back halfway up its length as if about to swipe the others off the summit ridge. My guide book cited the myth of a long-ago chief in the act of bringing his mere down on a fleeing bunch. Frozen there forever.

An e-mail had come in from Graeme Acton, Kim Hill's producer on National Radio. The Kim Hill show had already picked up on the web site through its internet commentator, Paul Reynolds. Now they were suggesting an interview, and before leaving the caravan park, I rang Acton. I'd give myself an easy day, walk the 10 kilometres to Whangarei Heads, and climb Mt Manaia next morning. We could do the interview from there.

"Right 10.30 a.m." said Acton.

Four kilometres out from Whangarei Heads, a white dove flew across my path. I kept on, arriving finally around evening, at McLeod Bay. A couple of dogs charged up.

"Zeus! Kasha!" called a woman sitting at a beach table with a mobile phone standing upright there.

"They'll jump all over you," she called to me. "But it's okay."

"A lot of people see Staffies and think they're pit bulls," she said as I approached with bits of dog drool hanging off my shorts. "Well - they're totally friendly."

A couple of Collies came up the beach, and as if to prove their reputation for friendliness, the two Staffordshire terriers went off to leap and slaver over them.

"Rani's fine," the woman patted the poodle. "Sam here - he's a Shitsu terrier - he's the only one we have to watch."

Sam cocked an ear at that, then strolled into the open yard next door and went for the neighbour's dog. A full-scale dog fight erupted. Zeus and Kasha raced into the action, and despite their gentle reputation one of them was soon hanging off the ear of the unfortunate dog-next-door.

The big man with the open-necked shirt and the gold chain around his neck, swung into action with surprising speed. He jumped up from the table, strode across, grabbed hind-quarters and pulled. Teeth suddenly separated from flesh. The man staggered backwards hitting an aluminium launch on its trailer, and the whole thing swayed, but he'd broken up the fight.

"Brian Head," he introduced himself as things calmed down. "And Dianne."



**Brian and Dianne Head**

I asked if there was a camping ground, and the Heads offered their back lawn. It was coming on to rain, and after a moment's thought, Brian Head offered the cabin cruiser drawn up on a trailer outside the house. I could sleep on a bunk in there.

We went indoors for a cup of tea. The phone rang.

"Yes Murray. Yes. Just keep practising and we'll reinforce you on Friday. 7.30 am is it? I'll phone at 6.15."

"It's your own body, Murray. You're the captain and whatever you tell it to do, it'll do. That's right. Your subconscious will monitor all the what's-its and rejection will be zero and you will recover in half the time."

"He has his operation Friday morning," said Head, hanging up the phone. "I will hypnotise him on the phone and put his body a calm state. I will zap him. I will say - Murray, sleep."

Brian Head advertised himself as a personal performance coach, a personal mentor, a hypno-motivation specialist. Sportspeople came to him. No, he couldn't mention all the names but they were big names. Certain names he could mention: Sandy Barwick the ultra-distance runner - when she was getting the bad hallucinations, the cobwebs and tunnels, it was Brian Head's tapes that brought her back again. Nik Burfoot, World Laser Champ in 1994.

Brian Head was into relaxation but that didn't mean sleeping in. He'd changed his own life firstly by a self-hypnotism technique that defeated his fits, then helped him sell cars, then flowered into a business as a

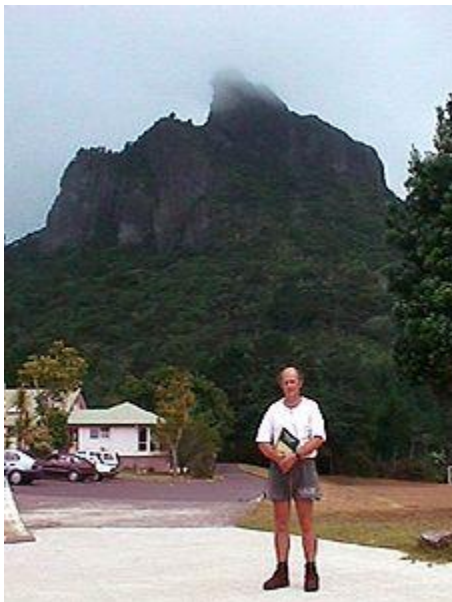
one-to-one hypnotherapist.

"But that one-to-one was not leveraging my efforts to best effect," said Head. Dianne and I now do seminars. We help people to access at that sub conscious level and write new human software programmes for themselves. We're aiming at the corporate areas, particularly stress in business, and we have a lot of success with real estate people."

Brian Head had his boat, a beautiful house, an interest in classic cars, and a new Volvo with the personal number plate MIND, with the superscript above it "It's all in the -"

Dianne had a lush vegetable garden with a hydroponic adjunct, and white doves. Their method seemed based on a fairly simple sequence. First, relax: your body got to feel like a sack of - the phrase recurred in Head's self-hypnosis tapes when describing ultimately relaxed muscles - slack rubber bands. That got you through to alpha territory and on those rolling pastures you put up the new waysigns.

What about the million-year plutonic roots, the weather-blasted and jagged summits that stood all around this area? The main mountain hung over this house. Dianne flicked a gaze up at it and said: "Manaia - it's a very moody mountain."



**John Marple in front of Mt Manaia**

At 8.30 next morning, I was up at the Whangarei Heads Primary School. John Marple was washing windows there. He'd been at the Heads 16 years. The Marples had come up for a holiday. They went back to Karori, then just quit. Didn't know why. This place simply called them. No jobs, they just came. Now he did everything. Water taxi skipper to get schoolkids to Bream Bay College. MAF inspector to see the anglers either side of the Heads didn't go over the finfish limits. He'd been the librarian of the primary school and organised the printing of the local history. Now he was the cleaner.

Manaia hung over the school too.

"It dominates the creative and artistic minds of Northland," said Marple. "When we first arrived, Maori wouldn't go past the mountain after nightfall. The spirits of the slain dwelled in the crags and Maori believed they came down at dusk. They used to plant crops in line with the mountain so the spirits wouldn't flatten the rows."

He gave me the local history book. I had time, so I sat down in the library and read a second explanation of those standing crags: Manaia was a tohunga. Maungakiekie, his wife was equally powerful in spiritual things. There were two daughters, a slave carrying a calabash. Dogs. The whole caravan was coming back from the Bay of Islands. Maungakiekie was quarreling with Manaia. It got ferocious. Enough! Freeze them.

I don't know that Mt Manaia is generally known in New Zealand, but it should be. Ngati Whatua and Ngapuhi have spiritual sway here and have put up at the entrance those sinuous unsymmetrical sculptures that seem so full of freaky wairua. No way this mountain could not be sacred. Could not be the

place where you stood and fought against the raiders from Ruakaka across the harbour, or the place where you put your most powerful corpses. The kauri on the way up are huge and squat. Ropes of rata loop down. There are brink and chasm glimpses, and then the track settles down into a steep climb. I'd brought one of the Lekis. Reinhold Messmer made the claim that with two of these things you could move as surely as an animal, and I was doing as well as a three-legged goat, and then I heard a voice.

Somewhere up front. It had a strident edge, like a bird call, but it was human. A woman's voice. Just blank bush all about. It was a little like an hallucination. I actually stopped - I thought *Maungakiekie*. The track zigzagged, and as I came up the zig, she stood on the zag, looking down on me. Two small but powerful dogs were straining towards me on twisted leashes.

"You're going to the top?" she said.

"Yes."

"You've got to use the ropes," she said.

"Really?" No-one had told me about the ropes. It gave an added urgency to get to the top. *Hang on Kim I'll just cinch this rope and I'm with you.*

"I can't stop," I said. "I've got a radio interview to do from the summit in a little while."

"Yes. You can do a radio interview with me. I know this mountain."

"No," I said. "I'm doing the interview. It's me they want to interview."

That seemed a bit abrupt. "I've got to go," I said, "but I'm carrying plenty of water and I'll give your dogs a drink at the top."

I went along the ridge. 10.15 am and I hadn't struck the ropes yet, but I needn't have worried. A picnic table stood there, and a DOC sign that said "Summit." Wooden steps led to a small platform and an adjacent bit of level rock edged with clingy vegetation. Not a lot of room, and nor was it the summit. The last bit of rock was vertical with no obvious way up, but I didn't investigate further. No-one but a Dingle would want to go on. I laid out two mobiles.

Acton rang and we arranged to keep both phones open.

"Once you're live with Kim," said Acton. "Stand still. Otherwise you can break the contact."

A distant voice on the path was getting closer, scolding

*"You shouldn't do that. I told you not to do that."*

Coming closer.

*"You want a hiding? I'll give you a good hiding."*

I waited.

The dogs were first onto that narrow platform. The woman right behind them.

"Are you going to the top?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Hello Geoff -"

Kim Hill came on, and we lost contact immediately. I picked up the second phone. National Radio had plugged the gap with Little Richard laying down a bit of early rock and roll.

I waited.

The woman stood off about five metres, looking at me. She produced a huge pair of binoculars. The clouds had parted briefly.

"That's Ocean Beach," she said. Chatty.

Things were tenuous. I needed to concentrate. Every journalist knows the power is in the detail. Kim Hill would ask me to describe the view. I would be as particular as a royal commentator: *Yes Kim, I can see the Queen coming up the path now. She's wearing a Norman Hartnell powder blue dress with that link-chain handbag and the diamond chip clasp . . .*

"Ocean Beach," I said. "Uh-huh."

"Hello Geoff."

"Yes - Kim. Little Richard - I love him."

I was on air. "Tell me - well tell me," said Kim Hill, "about the top of Mt Manaia."



**View from Mt Manaia**

She was standing there, windblown in Indian cotton. A flowy black-and-white patterned dress, with a long russet scarf. The scarf fell away and I saw with shock that her left arm ended at the wrist. She was watching me: *the eyes Kim, those little quizzzy muscles around the eyes, tohunga eyes.*

"The top of Mt Manaia has clouds whipping past at about 20 knots," I said.

"I can hear the clouds," said Kim.

The clouds parted on a few skerricks of detail. Oil tanks.

"I can see part of the trail I have to go ahead on, and that's down Bream Bay, past the

Marsden Point oil refinery," I said, "and I can see the direction I've come from . . ." I turned my head. Blankness. Whiteness. Nothing. " . . . it's kind of cloudy."

Oh great Geoffrey - terrific. I was having trouble concentrating. The woman was muttering at me, gesticulating at me. I couldn't pick what she was saying, didn't want to pick what she was saying. I made a mistake right then: I gave her that little downward ratcheting of the hand - the producer's quiet please signal.

"I was reading some of your despatches on the Internet this morning," said Kim, "and it makes one immediately want to -"

The woman lost patience. She suddenly shouted, loud enough to go out live on National Radio.

"YOU PROMISED TO GIVE ME A DRINK OF WATER!"

"Yeah - okay."

Break the link or not, I stooped for the water bottle, walked across, gave it to her.

"Who's with you Geoff?" enquired Kim Hill sweetly, "on the mountain?"

"It's just someone I met on the trail."

"It's nice to make friends on top of mountains isn't it?" said Kim.

The woman upended the bottle. The Platypus water bottle is collapsible, just a tough plastic bladder, and you can squeeze it into whatever space is left in your pack, but it isn't a good item if you've only got one hand. Holding it to her mouth. Trying to steady the squashy thing with that stump. The dogs weren't



getting a look in. The water was pouring over the woman's mouth, over her face, her clothes.

She came towards me, glaring. She emptied the rest of the water onto the ground at my feet.

"I was reading some of the stuff you're putting on the Internet," Kim repeated, "and it makes me want to do it, it sounds fabulous."

"Yeah it is good, it is good." I was on the balls of my feet. My body was as tense as a sackful of tightly wound rubber bands.

The woman threw the bottle at me, and it fell at my feet empty, eddying in the wind. She pulled the dogs to heel and the whole chariot tugged its way to the top of the steps and disappeared.

*Whack! Whack! Whack!*

Someone began to hit the wooden hand- rail, or the picnic table below.

"Wow!" I said in dumb wonder. "Someone's beating something."

"Ahah!" said Kim.

"I just had a woman come up here, quite cantankerous with her dogs, and she demanded a drink of water," I said. "I just got abused for not quickly giving her a drink of water which I promised for her dogs."

"If you play your cards right, she'll walk the rest of the way with you," said Kim.

"Uh - no-o-o-o- ," I said. The beating sounds had stopped. My relief was palpable. "She has gone."

The interview went on another ten minutes then Kim Hill closed it up "I hope we'll catch up with you later en route - Geoff Chapple, and Te Araroa, the long pathway."

Two young women had arrived. They sat on the edge of the platform, and smiled. I shut down the phones. There we all had been. I'd been in charge of the calabash, and we'd quarreled. How close had we gone to that threshold when powers greater than yourself get pissed off? How close to being turned to stone? I'm not an arrogant man. I don't believe that, come the transubstantiation, I'll necessarily make a pillar tall enough to be seen at sea, but something about the size of a birdbath, definitely. Big enough anyway for the future mother-and-daughter hikers onto Mt Manaia to speculate on:

"Mummy - if that one's the woman who got angry, then this must be the man who didn't give her the water quickly enough, but what's that lump on his head?"

"That was his cellphone darling - you see he was busy talking to the nation about the mountain and he was ignoring his only human companion who knew more about the mountain than he did, so I think that's another reason why she got so angry."

"Okay - and what's this jaggedy bit sticking out?"

"That? Well according to the legend darling, that's his Leki stick"

## #19 Bream Bay - Mangawhai

*Bream Bay birds, the Brynderwyns, the guardians of both, and the B-grade script*

Cracking the crude is a very 20<sup>th</sup> century enterprise, but the noises made by the Marsden Point oil refinery are Victorian. As I passed by it hissed and roared and rumbled like an old steam engine. Happy signs dotted the fence. *Smile, you are now under closed circuit surveillance.*

I didn't go in but went on past the anglers, past the writhing octopus someone had brought in and was holding by the head, the kids putting their arms to its suckers then tearing free, screaming.

Clouds heavy with rain blew up from behind, but it was a tailwind, the white sand still squeaked dryly underfoot and it was an easy walk down Bream Bay to the Ruakaka River. I walked upriver, but the tide was in and pushing the river back into uncrossable depths. I was still on the deserted northern side, when the rainstorm broke, and I put up the tent there and looked out on the baches and the Ruakaka Caravan Park just 100 metres distant across the river. The sounds of Greensleeves drifted persistently over the water, and presently I saw Mr Whippy glide away, unreachable.

I settled down, but it was still early. Much of the reserve around the river mouth is a bird refuge, marked out by DOC tapes, and the tent acted as a hide. I simply watched the birds. Wrybills, pied stilts, the oyster-catchers, dotterels, a heron.

In the morning, I waded the river at knee depth across to the motor camp, and kept on. The next river, the Waipu, was not going to be that easy. After walking a few hours I saw a colony of blackback gulls, then six of the comparatively rare Caspian terns. Those birds hang out by rivers and I knew I was getting close. In the distance I could see kids playing in the surf, scrambling on all fours up and down the beach.



**Above - gulls and other seabirds**

**Below - left to right - dotterel, oyster-catcher & again (above) caspian terns (below), heron (above), pied stilt (below)**

As I got closer I could pick the two supervising adults. Closer yet: the man was naked, a bearded rivermouth man who simply waited in this deserted place for me to arrive. The river mouth was just 100 metres or so beyond where he sat. It was big, wide, deep.

"How do I cross the river?" I asked.

"There's a road-bridge about two kilometres up," said the man.

That was disappointing. I was carrying a Whangarei District Plan with the cadastral mapping that indicates property boundaries. There were five bits of private property between where I stood and the road-bridge, and no marked reserve.

"But if you want to wait, we're going back across in ten minutes," said the man.

We walked back upriver a few hundred metres, making the introductions.

"For me, this is a very happy meeting," I said.

"Synchronise the watches, arrange the rendezvous, that's when you miss each other," said Michael van Beek.

"Go with the flow," said Karen.

DOC tape was strung along on iron holders beside us, marking the boundaries of a bird refuge, and a bird was keeping pace, dragging one foot. "Oyster-catchers," said Michael. "I tell the kids that when they do that - when they begin the broken wing act - you're meant to follow them. They're leading you away from their chicks. People think 'Oh, I'm annoying it' and go the other way. That's what you don't do."

The kids, Adrian Loe, and Andrew, Matthew, and Sarah van Beek, had built a giant sandcastle near where the dinghy was moored, and as we arrived the moat was just beginning to flood.



We crossed, and the van Beeks invited me into the house that stood above the boat ramp. The family was presently holidaying here with Michael's mother Leonie, but this was the place where he'd grown up. The house commanded the southern side of the river right down to the lagoon. It was a big property that the van Beeks had never considered subdividing, nor planting out in trees: this land, and the house with its big picture windows was kept clear for shore birds.

A telescope stood in the main room. The binoculars were ready to hand on the sills.

"These are the ones my kids gave me," said Leonie.

"These are the ones my mother gave me," said Mike.

Sweeping the river mouth. Watching the refuge, which is different from a sanctuary -

the public is not banned, but protective rules apply. If someone came with dogs, the van Beeks would take the boat across and warn them.

The van Beeks were the guardians of the vulnerable birds that simply lay their eggs on the sand: most of the transgressions they handled themselves, and they only called in DOC for the most serious threats, fires or deliberate predation.

Love those birds: the rare fairy tern lived on the Waipu Spit on the southern side of the river, Leonie had been within a few metres of one - there were just 30 left in New Zealand.

"But there were ten eggs this year," said Leonie. "and seven fledglings. It's been a good season for the birds. Most of the chicks were hatched before the Christmas rush and the weather was good, not like last year - one cyclone after another."

Mrs van Beek knew the river well and I established that it was crossable at low tide in a waist-deep wade only about 600 metres back from the mouth, between two promontories that jutted out there. The Waipu River need not stop Te Araroa, and a backpacker hostel did business nearby.

We got into the dinghy again, and Michael van Beek set me ashore at the top of the Waipu Spit. The sea on one side, and a shallow lagoon on the other that stretched almost to Waipu Cove: it was a natural breeding and feeding ground for shore birds.

Shore birds run the spectrum from awesome on down to clown: The godwits, the knots, the curlews have about them the mystical nimbus of their unimaginable journeys to Siberia, and most of the others have, at least, with their long legs and beak, a wonderful elegance and poise. The oyster-catchers don't have any such things.

They just have character. They seem to hang out in threesomes, and talk to each other with piercing cries. They bully the stilts just for fun. They have a muscular stride and are great walkers, and as they go the big red bill taps on every mollusc's door, overturns the empty shells too. They ransack the beach, and they are its clowns.

I was watching for fairy terns. Back at the house we'd discussed their distinctive markings and examined Geoff Moon photos. Yellow legs, not red. Lighter in build than their cousins the white-fronted terns. The distinctive black cap that all terns have, from the Caspian on down, was less severe, was deckle-edged.

I may have seen one. A single small grey sickle wavered on an inland dune, but I couldn't get close enough to know, and then the oyster-catchers simply took over the game.

Two oyster-catcher fledglings fled into the dunes. One of their parents eyed me. It seemed to me the fledglings were gone and I posed no threat, but the bigger of the two birds engaged me anyway. *Hey, you big ape!* He intercepted my direction of travel and began to strut along about 20 metres in front. I remembered what Michael van Beek had said. I followed briskly. This was no standard broken wing act. I'd struck the Jim Carrey of the Waipu Spit. He began to reel and limp and stumble. I followed, the bird turned towards the lagoon and you could see his drag marks in

the wet sand. One seriously sick oyster-catcher.

I kept following, and finally it was all over for the bird. My persistence had paid off. I'd exhausted it. Its long red legs simply folded up. The whole body went down on the wet sand. The wings flapped feebly. The beak gaped open on its last breath and, as if falling finally on its own sword, the head flopped hopelessly forward and the beak half-buried itself in the mud.

Hands outstretched I advanced. The thing was a wreck. It remained only to put it into my bag and save myself the price of a pie at the Waipu Cove motor camp. One gleaming eye perhaps gave the game away. Bright as a bead. Calibrating speed, distance and at the last moment - hey sucker! - the long red legs kick-launched it, the wings gave a couple of powerful sweeps, and the bird rose clean and unencumbered and flew away over the lagoon.



**Oystie does a Hollywood**

I stayed at the Waipu Cove camp, and set off up Cullen Road in the morning. A few kilometres up it turned into a paper road and climbed steeply, linking at the cloud-swept summit ridge with the Brynderwyn walkway. I turned east down that, still on the paper road, a thoroughfare kept open by the few people who have houses up here. A couple of hundred metres in, the route ran through a collection of sheds and dwellings.

Charming - like England where the walks run right past the farmhouses. A man was in the garage.

"I like it," I said, "It's just like England."

"You're from England?"

"No."



**Peter Burrowes**

Peter Burrowes was. A Midlands accent. As I enthused about the track he warmed to the subject and showed me - "Just oop here below the watertank . . ." - where he'd put in a seat for trampers to sit and admire the seascape far below.

We came back down the hill. A dark woman wearing what looked like a sari came out of a doorway and silently watched us kick the dirt.

Burrowes was showing me a survey peg. The road passed inside his boundary, but it was swings and roundabouts. One of his sheds lay outside that mark. The paper road, Burrowes was saying, ended just a few hundred metres beyond the houses, and he'd also been at work on down there: "That where the actual track starts, it gets awfully overgrown with gorse, and I clear it so people know where they're going."

I was interested in a man who would do that. Another guardian. I suggested we sit down and have a talk. We went inside his house. The same view. I whistled appreciatively.

"Yes, it's like a little bit of heaven on earth," said Burrowes.

But it wasn't the view that was the most striking thing. The house itself was still as a pond. The loudest sound was the ticking of a grandfather clock. The pictures on the wall were either prints of square-rigged ships, or mathematically ascending vase-like shapes capped with bursts of white light. Everything was clean, polished, perfectly ordered, and informed the central statement the house was making. Even down to the table mats, precisely laid and each with a picture of a chubby renaissance angel, wings peeking over its shoulders. A young woman slipped out of an adjoining room, was introduced as Violet, and quietly slipped away again.

"I have no tea or coffee," explained Peter Burrowes, and broke out something called Ecco. "Will this be all right?"

"I have no milk, can you drink this?"

He flipped the latch on a carton of soy-milk stirring it in.

"No radio," he said. "No television."

The stepdown living room was plushly furnished, carpeted, with big sofas, a thigh-high and gleaming wooden elephant, and brass bodhisattva heads dotting the polished ledges. A vase stood on a central low table of shining wood, and upwards from that, arum lilies were arrayed. On the dresser, a huge encyclopedia lay open at the middle: less like a reference book than an affirmation of the vastness of all

knowledge. Crystals lay in a row along the sill of the picture window, refracting the light.

I went to sit down on the sofa.

"If your clothes are dirty, I'll put down paper," said Burrowes.

We checked and decided I could sit down.

I'd come in to discuss tracks, and we did, but the house was too unusual not to enquire further into Burrowes own life.

"What do you do?"

"Let's say I'm in the service of God, and leave it at that."

That turned out to be something called the St Germain Foundation.

"We're working towards the achievement of self mastership, to bring down the perfection of God on this earth. That ascension is there for everyone. Jesus did it. At least one Indian master has done it. There is a blaze of light and the ascension occurs. The cellular structure changes and gets filled with light.

"The path to ascension is there for the choosing," said Burrowes, "and people who are not choosing to go Godward will come a gutser.

"We have made a hash of it." Burrowes spread his hands. "Greed, the pleasures of the flesh. The massed consciousness of mankind is causing the turmoil, it is affecting the weather."

We were, he said, at a critical stage

"As we pass out of the Piscean Age is it? into the Aquarian Age, time is becoming no-time. Scientists have realised the 24-hour day is now down to something like 19 hours. The outside of the universe is going faster. The vibration is raising itself to a higher state, but the negative things can't vibrate at the same pace and so a lot of things are breaking down.

How close was he personally to the ascension?

"For me personally it's a slow ongoing process, but you can't put a time on it.

"Time is compressing. My mind is not big enough to comprehend it all, but I know this. God is the supreme intelligent energy, the light of God never fails, and those of mankind who do not want to learn will die the second death."

"The second death!"

*Bong! Bong!*



At that moment, with an awful synchronicity, the grandfather clock struck 2 pm.

"The second death is not just that you pass out of this body - that's just the cycle of life and death. Reincarnation - yes. But if you die the second death you fall out of that cycle. You return to the universal substance. You cease to be an individuation of God. You do not exist."

I cast a hand around. "This is a beautifully ordered house. Do you share it with anyone?"

"My ex-wife is in the next house - the ablution block is in between."

"I saw her," I said. "She was Indian."

"Part English, part African," said Burrowes. "This house I share with a part-Malay flatmate." He lifted his eyes to indicate the significance to it all. "The great mixing of the races."

I went down the paper road to the start of the bush track. A good clear beginning. Gorse, but beautifully trimmed. Another guardian - the expanding universe itself directing this one. Whatever it takes I guess.



At track's end stood another guardian's house. It looked interesting, elfin, but there was no-one home. A gated BellSouth access road led down to the highway. When I'd designed the trail it'd seemed to me possible, once the Brynderwyn track ended, to go down a small sideroad to Anderson's Cove and make your way a short distance around Bream Tail to join up with the Mangawhai Cliffs Walkway. Mangawhai Cliffs is important to Te Araroa - by reputation it's a good walk and it offers another chance to see fairy terns. But the new BellSouth access road had moved the Brynderwyn Track's drop-point onto the highway further south than I'd expected, and I didn't want to go back.

Instead I walked a couple of hundred metres down the highway to the tidy entrance of Bream Tail Farms. The gate, the post-and-rail fencing were all creosoted, and you could see it was a farm that was proud of itself, but the signs were specific. "Private Entrance - No Public Access" said one. "Private Property," said another. "No Entry Unless on Farm Business. No Thoroughfare. No Beach Access."

It was pretty hard not to get the message. I almost didn't go in. Something in me

knew this might turn into a B-grade script. But the farm was a connection through to the Mangawhai Cliffs Walkway and I did go, double-checking the gate to ensure I'd re-fastened it absolutely securely. I didn't want any silly slipups. At the least I'd sound out the farmer's objections to public access. If it involved the Health and Safety in Employment Act, we could possibly help.

I came up to a house, and knocked.

A big man wearing a T-shirt and a baseball cap pulled himself from a divan inside and came to the door.

"Are you the farmer?"

"No. That's his house up there by the shed."

"I'll just go up and see him."

"No. He's out playing bowls."

"His wife then."

"No. She won't be there."

He eyed my pack.

"He won't let you through mate, I'm telling you. Okay?"

The man turned and went back inside. I stood there a moment. That conversation was closed, but I had a pencil and paper. I could write the farmer a note, and give him a contact number.

The farmer's house was about 200 metres distant, hidden behind a screen of trees. I started out in that direction, and had made about ten metres when there was a shout from behind.

"Hey! Out the gate!"

"I do want to go up to the farmhouse," I said, "and I'll tell you why."

"No. Don't tell me why. Out the gate or I'll chase you out the gate. One or the other."

I left, and roadwalked the four-odd kilometres to Mangawhai Heads.

## #20 Pakiri - Leigh

*Te Araroa almost ends in a burst of pure light, then meets a radical, then orders up fish and chips*



Wild goats watched me go. I went on past Mangawhai's enormous bare dune, down to Pacific Beach on Carter Holt Harvey Forest Roads, then along the beach to Te Arai headland. It was there the wild goat checked my progress briefly before returning to trails of his own.

At the top of Pakiri Beach the surfers were out in force, but I hardly stopped. It was already afternoon, and I wanted to get to Pakiri's motor camp before nightfall. I made it as the dusk deepened, and dotterels, in greater numbers than I'd ever seen before, skittered here and there in front of me like so many feathered ball bearings.



I ran into one of the beach wardens, Greg McDonald. "Ken?" he said.

"No."

"Ken?"

No, I was Geoff, and we got talking about Pakiri, and the \$5 fee now charged by local Maori for every vehicle going up the beach. Ngati Wai had persuaded the Crown to hand over a dry river bed, so getting a narrow but 100% Maori land strip between the dunes and the sea.

But McDonald kept flashing me disbelieving looks.

"Ken Gordon. You talk like him. Your teeth are like his teeth. You're his splitting image. The same coloured eyes, the same nose. His hair might be a bit more blonde, but otherwise . . . even your voice - it's amazing. Look you might have been adopted out you guys. If you saw him you might never get away."

Who, I asked, was Ken Gordon.

"He's a good bloke, one of the best. A local farmer. You're his splitting image."

"You think I should go see him?"

"You should, you should," said McDonald. "Across the other side of the river. Go down the road there to a T junction, turn right, go down about three kilometres and you'll see his name on a letter box. If he's not on the farm, he'll be working on a house made of sand bricks up on the hill behind."

"You must go. You're doing this long tramp right? If you're looking for something and don't know what it is, it might be Ken and this is the place that he lives mate."

I remembered something Kim Hill had said during the interview two days before. "All the best journeys, odysseys, have some kind of psycho-therapeutic content Geoff," she said. "Are you finding yourself?"

I'd fudged an answer to that question, but here it was. The way McDonald had described it the match was perfect in every detail. It was almost scary. I could see it now. The two clones approaching each other. The meeting. The handshake. The burst of white light as matter met anti-matter.

Next day I had to back-track. That hardly mattered for a man about to find himself, but the beginning of the enterprise was not auspicious.

I found the farmhouse and knocked on the door. Ken's mother Laurel came into the kitchen.

"Is Ken home?" I said, and waited for her to fall about with amazement.

"No, he's up the road working on the building site," she said.

"Well tell me," I said. "Do I look like Ken?"

Laurel was 84, and limping with a cracked bone in her leg. She came up to me to get a better look: "You do look a little bit like Ken I suppose."

"When I knocked on the door," I persisted. "and you came out - what did you think?"

"I thought it was the peacocks," said Mrs Gordon. "They sometimes make knocking sounds at the door. Ken would never knock on the door."

Okay. I took my leave and went up to the building site. The sand-brick walls were already up and I could see two men working up on the roof framing, a bearded carpenter with a woven flax hat, Mat Lomas, and a younger man, Barney Guar.

"Is Ken there?"

"Ken," called Lomas, "Someone wants to see you."

A face popped over the wall. It was, if I might say so, an interesting face.

"Ken," I said. "I'm meant to be your double."

I presented myself to the whole working party on the roof, sweeping off my hat, and Ken's two workmates took time to compare one fair-skinned, hook-nosed, grin-creased face with the other, but they didn't exactly fall off their perches.



"If you squint, there's something there," said Lomas. "And one thing's for sure, a lot of the grandfathers did more than they were given credit for."

Ken Gordon had been quietly studying me. "My ears stick out more," he said.

I planned to walk Cape Rodney's rocky coastline, to the Marine Reserve at Goat Island Bay, then across the headland to Leigh. The coastal walk was easily possible but I needed to be careful. A headland can beckon you around the foot of its cliffs, put some deep surging cleft in your way, then trap you with an incoming tide as you retrace your steps.

Check the tides: I'd made my own observations coming down Pakiri Beach the previous night. The tide seemed to be full around 6 pm, and I figured if I started the headland walk at around 10.30 next morning I'd be walking on an outgoing tide, and quite safe.

I double-checked at the Pakiri motor camp before departing. The man at the counter looked at the tide charts. High tide was at 1.30 pm, he said. That was a shock. It ran directly counter to my own observations, but I didn't query the information. Did he think I could make it around before the tide? Yes, the sea was relatively calm. I should just get there, but I'd need to move fast, and be careful. The cliffs were unforgiving.



I set off past the sunbathing cows to the end of the Pakiri Beach. The headland looked formidable. Waves were leaping at the edge of the rock platform, and the cliffs behind were sheer. Still, I went on. I figured if there was an emergency I could probably find a bit that was less steep, climb it and just wait out the tide, but the waves looked sinister.

Halfway round I met some fishermen. I asked them about the rock platform through

to Goat Island, and the state of the tide.

"It's an easy walk around - and the tide's still going out. Low tide is at 1.30 pm."

Of course. The waves still leapt at the edge of the rock platform, exactly as they had before, but they'd turned to pussycats.

Goat Island Bay was New Zealand's first marine reserve, and we'd deliberately included it into Te Araroa. Fish, crayfish, sea-life of every kind abounds here and is entirely protected. It was a Sunday, and Goat Island Bay was wall-to-wall people. Dozens of people were knee-deep in water, feeding fish. Dozens more were lying prone on the surface, wet-suited and with snorkels, observing the fish life below. A few scuba divers were donning their weight belts ready to explore at greater depths, and children out on the rocks were skittering away from a surging blow-hole. The beach itself had hundreds of picnickers, and a glass-bottomed boat was doing a good trade. I had a swim, saw a few blurry fish, then went on up to Auckland University's research laboratory on the hill. To get to Leigh I needed permission to cross university land. The Rodney District Council has already proposed a walk across the land, linking up with Cape Rodney Road, then the harbour walk around Leigh to get to the little fishing port itself. I wanted to test the route.

Dr Bill Ballantine listened with sharp interest to Te Araroa's plan.

"I have always liked the idea of a walkway around the coast," he said. "They've done it in England - Pembrokeshire, Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Somerset, Yorkshire - there's well over 1000 kilometres of coastal walkway that exists there now. It's all been subject to negotiation, and they don't just throw the Treaty of Waitangi at you there - the farmers will quote the Magna Carta mate.

"Yet it can be done. In remote areas the farmer usually can't afford to fence it off. Now if someone says - we can't pay for the walkway land, but we will fence it, 20 metres back from the cliff - then the farmer is interested. He didn't want that edge land anyway. We will plant trees on that strip - the farmer is interested. We will make rules that there is no camping, no firearms, no dogs - the farmer is interested. And we will give you, the farmer, the power in law to ensure your rights.

"That's the way it's done. No-one sells anything. You simply negotiate with the landowner the right of people to go along the coastal margin - that is, after all, a birthright - and if there has to be stiles or fences then your walkway authority looks after that."

Te Araroa, I said was not pure coastal walk.

"I like it though," said Ballantine. "You don't want it to be all the same. Not all bush, not all the deepest valleys, not all the mountain tops. You'd go through representative bits - including Auckland? Auckland would be part of it?"

"Yes," I said, "Auckland is a part of it."

"I like that - we're fighting for the marine reserves to be the same. If there's something distinct - the giant kelp beds around Stewart Island, or the big mangroves



in the north - we'd want a representative bit put into a reserve."

"I still want my coastal walk mind. Let's have that too. Look - put me down with that idea of a complete coastal walk. Put me down as a raving radical if you like, and make yourselves look positively reasonable in comparison."



We went out for a photograph with the reserve as backdrop, but Ballantine gestured further out to sea, to Hauturu - Little Barrier Island.

"Hauturu was New Zealand's first terrestrial nature reserve," he said. "In 1888 the Government said it would buy it, but it took 13 years to do. Leigh was the first marine reserve. That took only 12 years to put in place. What do we say about Te Araroa?"

### **Bill Ballantine**

"We want it to be a millenium project," I said. "That gives us just two years to get the idea up and the route acknowledged."

I tramped the university boundary up to Cape Rodney Road. That led down to Leigh Harbour where fishing boats lay at anchor. I went on up to the small cross-roads town and ordered fish and chips.

"We are a small shop," said the sign taped to the counter. "We are NOT McDonalds. Expect delays on orders when we are busy."

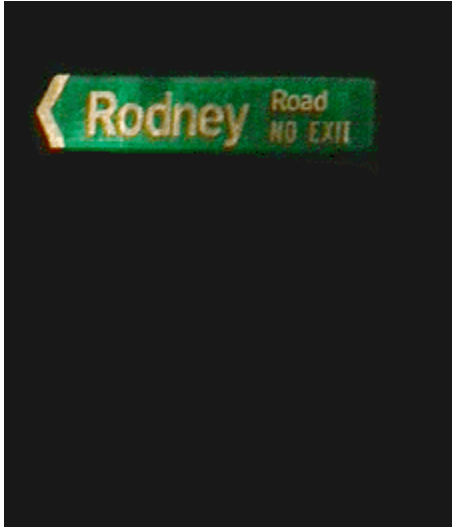
Ten people were waiting in the shop and the order took a while, but takeaway shops on fishing harbours are usually the best around, and it took only 25 minutes for the Leigh shop to prove itself.





## #21 Leigh - Warkworth

*The metropolis tugs at Te Araroa, the heat wave wilts it, seeds stick to it, but youth supports it.*



The 25 kilometres of bush-clad ranges between Leigh and Warkworth needs very little development to transform it into a 20-kilometre through trail, part of Te Araroa.

Tracks already exist through most of it. A few kilometres out from Leigh, Rodney Rd turns into a paper road that traverses farmland, then enters Omaha State Forest, tracks onward to the summit of Mt Tamahunga and out the other side. It is not a formal tramping route, but enterprising trampers use it anyway. It takes you through to Dome Forest, and you can pick up 4WD tracks there that pass close to DOC's Dome Forest track. Once on that track it's a shortish walk out to State Highway one just above Warkworth.

The challenge was to connect up the various tracks. We'd done it already on paper, but how would that stack up in the real world?

I rang the DOC field centre at Warkworth. As usual, it was a goat-hunter who knew the forests best, and Reuben Williams arranged to meet me at the Leigh pub.

We went over the route on a topo map. Williams traced the track to Tamahunga and pointed out an old pa site just below the summit. He knew the history, he was Ngati Wai and it was family history. Hearing that Waikato prisoners were being maltreated on Governor George Grey's nearby Kawau Island in the 1860s, the Maori chief Tenatahi sailed over on a scow with a rescue party, freed them, and everyone fled back to Tamahunga. Tenatahi was Williams' great great grandfather.

It was Williams who first mentioned Auckland: the city was still 65 kilometres distant as the crow flies, but from the top of Leigh Hill, he said, you could pick out the flashing aviation lights on Auckland's Sky Tower.

I set out from Leigh at 5 am next day to glimpse those lights. The city was already close enough that you could feel its pull, the traffic it generated, the people it shook loose and I'd already been recognised once at Leigh by a fellow Aucklander.



But the Leigh Hill didn't do it that day. I climbed into dense cloud. Even at daybreak I was still using a torch to check the road names. Then, as the light gradually penetrated, Rodney Rd turned into a perfect paper road, a wide stretch of grass fenced either side to keep stock off. It degenerated later into a rough track through gorse, but there was always a road marker sticking out over the gorse to guide you through, and once the trail hit Omaha Forest bush, the route to Tamahunga was clear.

I came down onto farmland on the far side. Something was wrong. The trail wasn't meant to exit on a farm, but right then I was distracted by the first friendly sheep I'd encountered on the trail. It bounded over, licked my legs for salt, and breathed heavily onto the camera lens.



I went down a farm race, past the barn where a dog bounded out snarling and snapping at my legs until a farmer, John Williams, emerged from the farmhouse and called the thing off.

He apologised for his dog, and I explained it wasn't my plan to blunder onto his farm. Over a cup of tea he took the map and showed me the wrong turn I'd made at the summit, a mistake that had dropped me four kilometres east of my planned exit point. That was disappointing - I'd calculated the 5 am start would give me enough time to get through both the Omaha and Dome forests in a day. Still, John Williams was good value. He was a trumper's dream. He let the Auckland Tramping Club and others park their cars on his

land, using the farm, and the track I'd descended, as a route to Mt Tamahunga.

"The way I see it we're lucky to be here and I'm prepared to share - but if you break a leg or something on the farm, don't moan," said Williams.



John Williams' wife Martha arrived home and I laid out Te Araroa's blueprint for them both to look at.

"A national track - yes," said Martha. "It's a great idea, and I'd suggest that the children from local schools could look after sections of it. At the moment they sit at home and watch TV, or they're at the video parlours. The kids from the city schools in particular - how many of them ever go out on a tramp? But I'm biased about these things."

Martha Williams worked as a teacher at the Matakana Primary School. I mentioned the friendly sheep at the back of their farm. It belonged to their daughter, seven-year-old Sian.

"She's called Rosie. She ate all the lacebark trees we'd planted up the drive and we had to banish her," said Martha. "When pet day came up at the school we had to retrieve her from the back paddock, but she still won first prize."

I crossed the Williams farm, then the adjoining farm, and picked up the 4WD track that led off Govett Wilson Road into Dome Forest. I was hurrying now, and I was quickly through to Conical Peak, but there the 4WD track diverged.

The map showed no such divergence, but the main track was clear enough. It led away right, and was the same one Reuben Williams had recommended. Follow it some 4 km, he'd suggested, then bush-bash two kilometres across to the Dome track. No-one had mentioned a left-hand road, it looked newish, and to a man in a hurry it looked to head off in exactly the direction I wanted.

The topo map showed an orange forest road abruptly halted in the valley south-west of Conical Peak. It was labeled Waiwhiu-Conical Peak Road. Surely the map simply hadn't caught up with the forestry road development, and surely, a road named Conical Peak Road, must be planned to reach the peak where I now stood? To a mind in a hurry, this road that diverged left was simply the completion of the Waiwhiu-Conical Peak Road, the same road that had the sublime attribute of passing within a few hundred metres of Dome Mountain. If my guess was correct, the left hand divergence could save me two long kilometres of bush bashing.

I took a compass bearing and went left, but it was soon obvious the road was curving gradually north-east, not south. The compass arrow pointed, at times, back over my shoulder, and the road finally tailed out in a grim little cul de sac where the bones of slain deer were tied to the surrounding pines like presents hung from a Christmas tree. A few imprinted bootmarks in the mud trekked away west into deep forest. It was a primitive ridgetop trail, but it was headed the way I had to go. I followed it in.

Another hour, and dusk was drawing in. I'd grown anxious. The forest seemed suddenly immense. There were pines all around - silent. I could see across a chasm to a high ridge on the other side - pines, more

piners. I spread out the map, and tried to figure exactly where I was.

The map: its contour lines never quite prepare you for the scale of the country you've entered. The map: the forest roads it portrays in bright orange are never matched, when you stumble out onto those same roads, by the dusty grey of reality. The map: its representation of a pine forest - exactly 36 of the neat tree symbols to every square kilometre - hardly does justice to the sheer presence of a big pine forest. There are millions of the things, a vast monopoly blanketing the hillsides as far as the eye can see. The forest was growing dark, and aside from those out-of-sight green tops, the interior was dead. Brown needles and broken branches lay on the floor. Above that, the lower branches angled out at 45 degrees from the trunks were dry. They intersected with similarly-angled branches of the trees in the neighbouring ranks. A walk down the aisle below these branches was like a walk beneath the unending crossed swords of some vast military wedding. Except that the scattered bits along the brown aisle were not confetti, but puff balls, the washed out red remains of Fly Agaric, and the occasional skulls of slain animals. On this long journey into dusk, I saw all this, and I saw a Miss Haversham of the forest, a moribund totara, its growth crippled, its own foliage horribly clogged with thick pine needle pads collected over decades and no wind ever to shake them free.



I pitched camp. I'd sought no permission, and would not have been given it had I asked, but I hadn't planned to stay in this forest, and I was careful, lighting no flame, striking not a single spark in this tinderbox place. The forest seemed less than friendly, and I concentrated on the good things, the complete shelter as the wind soughed softly far overhead, the easy penetration of the tent pegs into soft humus, the springy pine-needle carpet that was so comfortable I need not even unpack the Thermarest.

I was soon asleep, but I awoke in the night with that particular amnesia that sometimes strikes you in foreign hotels. I had no idea where I was, even who I was. I sat bolt upright, staring out through the tent flaps into the bars of some huge wooden prison. It took a long moment to retrace the steps that had led me to this place.

The next morning the cicadas were singing in a single sheet of glistening sound - and the forest seemed less overwhelming. I found the ridge that led through to the Dome, and after some hours, partly on goat-hunter trails, and sometimes bushbashing on the margin where pine forest met bush, I finally sighted the mountain.

Beyond this forest, New Zealand was sweltering in a heat wave. The temperature was reaching 34 degrees in some places, and if you had to be out in it, cool bush was probably the best place to be. I'd realised the contrast between open country and bush just yesterday during the sweltering hour-long walk across farmland to get back onto my missed trail. But maybe I'd forgotten. My first sight of the Dome revealed open country leading up to the northern side of the mountain, and I silently rejoiced at coming out of the bush with such precision, with nothing to cross now except meadow.

Difficult meadow: the grass was often as high as my chest, and it grew on cut-over pine forest, an invisible cross-hatching of branches and trunks where my boots slipped and jammed. From the bush walk, my legs were already carrying a fair cargo of the little brown hooked seeds of the native sedge. Now it was around 3 pm, the hottest part of the day, and I so drenched in sweat that every other loose grass seed the meadow could shake over me stuck fast as well. Even the delicate thistle seeds that usually, like

so many ethereal tumbleweeds, do no more than kiss and begone, plastered themselves by the dozen onto the wet one as he made his lurching, foot-pulling way across the diabolical meadow.

It was over an hour before I reached the Dome bushline and pulled myself up to the trig. I unpacked the mobile, and rang the DOC field office to tell them I was through. The mobile gave out its low battery signal, and halfway through the conversation beeped a triumphant *Discharging* signal. That ended the communication, but DOC knew I was okay, and discharging was an adequate description of a spent trumper, leaning against a trig, sweating from every pore.

I went on down the walkway to the Top of the Dome Teahouse, drank three orange juices, two coffees, sank a milkshake, then walked down State Highway One. The Sheep World Caravan Park was just a kilometre down the road. It was 6 pm, still early, and I could have got to Warkworth, but I was tired and dirty. I went in.

"Bloody hell," said the caravan park man. "Where have you come from?"

"Cape Reinga"

"Walking?"

"Walking."

"You're bloody nuts. Have something cold."

He whipped a hand into the frig and pulled out a bright green iceblock. Ian Reid formerly a builder on Waiheke Island - "the only asylum in the country without a fence around it" - was now a Warkworth boatbuilder and co-owner, with his wife Gail, of the motorcamp.

I was tired. All I wanted was a tent to crawl into, but Reid was a proud and energetic owner. He propelled me through all the amenities. The shower. The entertainment room. The spa:

"You must shower before you use the spa. Those that don't shower we put a rope around their tents and pull them down."

The open-air barbeque hot plates. The kitchen frig with free sauces, the free tea-bags, and milk. Ian Reid was a dynamo of enthusiasm for his camp.

"You see? You didn't want to look at the kitchen, so you wouldn't have found out about the free sauces, the tea bags." And after the grand tour, when finally I set down the pack and sat down against it, he stood looking at me,

"Huh. His legs have given up. Like a crayfish - what do you call it when you're not allowed to take them? A crayfish without a shell."





Gail came up.

"How do you live with this man?" I said.

"Stressfully."

"I was just a gigolo before I met Gail," said Ian Reid.  
"Now neither of us can afford to leave the other."

In the morning I noticed a tent pitched to overlook a small stream. A young guy was sitting there looking out onto a sunlit morning, and there was something appealing about the scene. The tent, the Yamaha 250 city tourer, the guy sitting at the centre of it just enjoying the morning. It was self-contained. It was like watching someone's deep meditation.

I was drinking tea at a trestle table, and he came across. Vince Holdsworth had been headed north on his bike, to Waipoua Forest, but the bike had overheated and he'd turned into the motor camp instead. He aimed to get going again this morning, a fresh start.

I told him I was walking through.

"Ah, you're the guy," he said. "I was talking to Gail last night and she was saying like: 'He's walking! He's walking the length of the island!'"

We talked cars. After coming out of the forest onto State Highway One I'd noticed all the grass on one side was perpetually bent over one way like coastal trees before the prevailing wind, except that the prevailing wind on SH1 was generated by big rigs, and all the grass on the other side of the road was bent the other way. I'd felt the same wind on my face, watched the procession of steel whizzing past thinking - like the naive who sees his first train in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *100 Years of Solitude* and reports seeing a kitchen towing a village - that there must be a similarly simple description of cars. But all that came to me during the walk down Highway One was that every one of these people ripping past at 100 kph was *sitting down*.

"It's easy to step into a car," said Holdaway, "and its a cocoon. It's like being in the living room with the TV. It's *Wow look at this. Look at that*, but you're out of touch. A motorbike is a little less so. It doesn't dominate your environment so much. You get the wind and sun on you. But I'd say your way is better."

I told him I'd spent the previous night camped in pine forest.

"Ah, that'd be a good camp. Pine needles - nice and soft. No need for a mattress."

"Right. Except the forest felt a bit weird. I prefer bush - Tane Mahuta right?"

"Tane Mahuta, the Twin Sisters, Cathedral Grove. There's a freshwater stream right on the Waipoua campground. I was wanting to follow that through to the coast. To the beach - previously I've just gone through the forest."

I told him I'd given up a good job to do my walk.

"Yeah, I understand that. I'm 24 and its been customer service and just whittling away, you know? I'm a yardman for Carters at Takapuna. All those little chats, and turning on the smile. It's quite boring. I'm planning on leaving. It costs \$3,000 for a ticket around the world with six stops, and I'll have saved \$10,000. I'll backpack, and do some of the great tramps. I'll explore and maybe bring back a service that the country can use. Life's too short. I want to have kids and tell them - you know - about the adventures."

I asked him what he wanted to be.

"I haven't found out everything about it, but there's a large spiritual side to life. There are clues - how good you feel outside, in nature. Life is just dribs and drabs in the city. Somewhere like Waipoua, it's an old-growth forest. People say that sitting in the Grand Canyon puts things into perspective, and I think an old forest does that too. We tend to create little worlds for ourselves, we think that the world revolves around us, but the forest gives you something else. Whatever it is I do, it will be more physically out there."

I told him about Te Araroa itself. How, if the plan worked, there'd be work for people out of doors, and work to be proud of.

"I'd really be into that. I'd love to be part of it. You can fax me on the Annapurna Circuit. 'Hey Vince: we're ready to go. We've got the galvanised nails, the wood for the boardwalks, the stone crushing equipment - you said you'd be into it, so where are you?' Yeah, fax me, I'd come back for that."



I mentioned the Internet site, told him that I was writing as I went, and Vince Holdsworth stood back and did a little finger-snapping dance. "You could write me into it. How about this: *I met this amazing man who did flamenco dancing, he did back flips and . . .*"

"None of those things," I said. "You're on-site, just as you are."



## #22 Warkwarth - Auckland

*Te Araroa shadows the SAS, meets the King of Waiwera, hits deep mud and is finally airlifted up and away*

Auckland. It was closing in. My home was there. My other identity was there - not this booted, pack-toting *pfadmeister*, the trail curling up like smoke up from his shoulder, but the other one, the one that people expect to be present at specified times and to do specified tasks.

I was having lunch at a Warkworth restaurant when a journalist friend, Robin Bailey, came in. We talked over the trail, and he looked at me ruefully over his Steinie.

"You really are a worry Geoffrey. Shouldn't you be in Wellington for the rehearsals to this Alley opera?"

Yes I should. I already had the plane tickets booked out of Auckland in just three days. My contract specified my attendance in Wellington for the lead up to the New Zealand International Festival of the Arts.

Cities closing in. Big-city deadlines. I had three days. I stuck my hat back on, shouldered the pack, and set out down Hepburn Creek Road.

A guy stopped in a white trade van lettered in blue: Pure Water Services. I didn't want the lift, but I was interested in the paper road that exited near Hepburn Creek. He gave me a landowner name, and as I walked I dialed the farmer on the mobile, but got no reply. Fifteen minutes later, a voice called out from a roadside garden: "Does a drink of water have any appeal?"

Same guy in his toweling hat: carrying a tall glass out to the gate. It was icy, delicious, and I said so. "It's bore water that has gone through a softener," said Ian Morrison, "through resins that attract out the calcium, the iron, the manganese . . . would you like another?"

These were professional glasses of water - Morrison made his living with water purifications systems and filters. I went inside and met Jyl Morrison. We discussed the route. Ian, quite unasked, had done me the favour of phoning ahead but like me had got no reply. We got down to maps.

He had a way of using that hat expressively. Oh no! The wrong paper road! He'd thought I was after a particular one that was further up than the one I did want. He tilted his head right back, one hand setting the hat over his face and patting it flat - a toweling squelch of misunderstanding. So then - he phoned through to Val and Robin Pendred whose property straddled the right paper road, and got permission. The toweling hat turned suddenly jaunty, its brim turned up sailor style to mark success.



Jyl and Ian were Christians, part of the Mahurangi Christian Community that had land on this foreshore, and they were Christian in generosity - did I want a meal before I went?

No. I had just three days, and I was anxious to move on, but Ian Morrison came up with one story that bore on my upcoming ridgetop walk past the Warkworth Space-Earth Satellite station.

"It was 1981," said Morrison. He took off his hat and looked at it contemplatively. "I remember the date because we'd just come back from smuggling bibles in Romania."

He was down on his riverside land, where mangrove met bush. Something was moving in there.

"Hello, hello."

A group of five men, dressed in civvies.

"Just passing through sir." An American accent.

"Uh huh. What's that thing there? That thing you're hiding behind your back."

Sheepishly presented - a sub-machine gun.

"And you - at the back. What's that you've got?"

Uh - a bazooka.

Morrison could see bullet clips and grenades bulging under shirts.

"I can explain." A New Zealander took over from the ranking American. "This is a military manoeuvre. We're testing security at the satellite station."

That made sense. It was just after the Springbok tour had disrupted New Zealand end to end. Activists had attacked telecommunication centres. One group, trying to stop international transmission of the fourth rugby test, had used an axe to take out the microwave repeater station on Moirs Hill. In the months that followed, the Government pumped its telecommunications security with high-voltage fences and anti-terrorist exercises. Morrison and local farmers knew the satellite station was a focus, but they'd always been told if SAS forces were using their land.

Morrison winkled out of the group a phone number to check credentials. Everyone trooped back and sat in the kitchen while he rang the Papakura commander.

"What are they doing on your property?"

"That's what I wanted to know."

The American major was the highest ranked, but Kiwis deal with Kiwis. "Put the sergeant on," barked the

Papakura commander.

The New Zealand 2IC stepped forward and the conversation, as Morrison remembered it, was:

" Sah - yessah. We decided not to stick within the allocated area, sah."

The bellow from the other end was so loud the SAS man held the receiver out from his ear.

"Our mission was to seek and destroy - sah. We decided to do that - sah - by whatever means would achieve the objective - sah."

Another bellow.

But the American-Kiwi force, in those balmy days when the military alliance with the USA still held, did achieve its objective. Morrison learned later the group departed his house, boarded a bus they'd arranged to pick them up in Hepburn Creek Road, drove round to the station, entered as an average group of tourist rubberneckers, and blew everything to bits with the bazooka and grenades.



I went on through the Pendred's paper road. It led to a ridge overlooking the satellite station. I'd expected to photograph it from on high, but the bush kept it from view. I climbed the only substantial tree in the area to get the shot, and, two metres above the ground, looked down at the branch at my feet. It was polished by use. The SAS, maybe even the combat boots of an American major, had been here before me.

I crossed SH1, and went on up the Moirs Hill walkway. It was dark before I reached the top, and halfway up, through bush, I caught first sight of the Sky Tower's aviation warning lights, blinking red. Then the city lights, vastly spread and glowing yellow with sodium colours.

I slept beneath the Moirs Hill microwave repeater, and in the morning watched dawn break over Auckland. The Sky Tower is now reckoned to be Auckland's symbol, but at any distance it's lost to the haze. The single icon that still heralds the city from afar, that has heralded the city ever since 1840 when Lieutenant-Governor Hobson bought the land and established the capital of New Zealand here, is Rangitoto.

I went down to Puhoi. Shortcuts, shortcuts. I'd planned to get there through forest, and had checked with local adventure biker Terry Willmer that through trails did connect the 7 km from Moirs Hill to Puhoi. They did, and I had a loose arrangement that he'd take me through. But it was a holiday weekend, and Willmer was booked solid. I could have done it solo, but I had a plane to catch. I played it safe, came down a summit track, connected with the Puhoi-Ahuroa Road, and walked to the Bohemian town that way.



Rodney District Council has long-term plans for a walkway down the Puhoi River to connect with the Auckland Regional Authority's park at Wenderholm. When it's in place it will be a popular addition to a popular regional park, but at present private ownership along the bank makes a trail difficult. Still, it will come, and in the meantime, Te Araroa Trust has included the river itself into its pathway. I canoed down, using the local hire company, then walked Wenderholm's perimeter track over the headland, across the footpath on Waiwera Bridge, into Waiwera itself.

Leki sticks. I have carried them throughout my journey and used them sometimes. When unused they stay strapped to my pack and act as a stimulus for dozens of extremely witty people.

"There's no snow around here mate - heh, heh, heh."

It's always the same joke. I set them straight, but only occasionally do I try full-scale education.

"Ski poles - look Mummy, ski poles !" Like that kid at the Mangawhai restaurant. I took him aside, unstrapped a pole, and showed him in great detail why these things were not ski poles. The carbon steel tips, the internal springing which also presupposed hard ground, the interlocking sleeves exactly adjustable for height: "They're German-made hiking poles - okay?"

I watched him turn back to his mum.

"Ski poles Mummy, ski poles." he howled.

"Listen kid, they're mud poles alright?"

Forget the engineering details, that was the breakthrough.

"Mud poles Mummy, mud poles," he shouted.

No-one though had yet recognised a Leki without being told first.

"You must be doing a fair amount of tramping to need hiking poles," said the 16-year-old youth behind the counter of the Waiwera General Store.

I reeled back.



**Damian Drury knows Leki sticks when he sees them**

"You're the first! The very first! Everyone thinks they're ski poles."

"But Leki only make hiking poles," said the youth, puzzled that anyone could make such an elementary mistake. "I'm pretty sure they do."

Leki! He'd even named them! The boy was good.

"How do you know about Lekis?" I asked.

"I do a fair bit of tramping,"

"Have you got a pair?"

"I want to get a pair - I've read about them in tramping magazines."

"What's your name? "

"Damian Drury."

"Damian," I said. "You have just won the tramping equivalent of Lotto. When I finish this trek, I'm personally going to donate you one Leki hiking stick."

I went outside and rang Telecom information. I was after a Bill Ward in Waiwera. No such person, said the operator, only an A.L. Ward. That didn't sound hopeful, but I tried the number anyway.

A woman's voice answered the phone.

"Mrs Ward?" I asked.

"No," said the voice. "It's Rosemary."

"Hello Rosemary. Do you have a Bill Ward at that address?"

"What does he look like?"

"I don't know."

"Well, there's all these Bill Wards," said Rosemary. "There's a Bill Ward here, and a Bill Ward there. There's a Bill Ward at Red Beach, and of course there's the Bill Ward who's the king of Waiwera. "

"That," I said, "is almost certainly the Bill Ward I want."

"Well he's a bit stuffed at the moment," said Rosemary, "He's just moving house and all his good and chattels are distributed all over landscape - but hang on."

Bill Ward came on the line. I explained who I was. Two years before, when working for the Department of Conservation, I'd come across his proposal for an off-road walk through Waiwera. I knew DOC was unlikely to do much about it, and I'd filed it for purposes of my own. When I'd put Te Araroa together, I'd included it. Now, I wanted to walk the proposed track with its designer.

"Hang on - I'll be down in ten minutes."



Bill Ward was 82, but disregard that number, and disregard his bandaged ankle. He set a cracking pace. We scrambled up from the main street, and stopped on a narrow grassed track graven into the steep hillside. His stick swept the length of it. "This is the old coach trail. It belongs to Transit New Zealand. They're not using it, they won't be using it, and I've been working with them to secure the right of everyone to traverse it. We don't want the thing alienated from the people."

A bit further up, the trail was overhung by foundation work for a new house.

"This man wanted the right to occupy the coach trail, and he'd got well along with that before we found out and were able to get his wings clipped."

The trail swung back toward the highway and disappeared but Bill Ward's stick pointed only forward. "The private property begins here, at the top of this very steep embankment. It's useless for access to the sections, and it would be of benefit if the council took it over. If they do not, then the only prospect of linking it into the trail is for the council to offer a big rates reduction to the land-owners for some kind of easement. Do a deal, but meantime, we can't use it."

Ward hopped a Hurricane wire fence and began to stride up the highway. State Highway One traffic bore down on us.

"You can see that going this way is a disadvantage."

Understatement. A galvanised crash barrier narrowed the shoulder to less than a metre from the highway lanes, but the King of Waiwera strode along beside it without a backward glance. A car towing a wide caravan swayed past, practically brushing our shoulders. I wanted to live. The king could do it his way, but I hopped across and monkeyed my way up hand over hand, keeping the barrier between myself and the traffic.

We reached the DOC bush reserve on top of Waiwera Hill. It was unsigned, undeveloped. Ward - I'd



discover later he was a member in his youth of Osonzac, the Otago section of the New Zealand Alpine Club - had the trumper's trick of taking personal responsibility for clearing any fallen trees on the trail. He didn't just step over them, he demolished them as he went with stamping feet and whacks with his stick.

"The track is, uh - *whack ,whack* - overgrown since I was last in. A few guys with slashers would bring it back - *whack ,whack* - quickly enough."

He'd begun to bleed from a cut on the arm, another on the leg, but he went admirably, steadfastly, forward, and I, ever the tyro and moving along close behind in imitation of an old master, dropped back only after taking a sharp blow on the bridge of the nose from supplejack recoil.

We crossed the headland and reached a grassed property that sloped up to an expensive-looking dwelling on the hill above.

"This land belongs to Sir Brian Barrett Boys," said Ward. "We've got a couple of metres width here and we could get down to the beach, but it would be preferable to go across Sir Brian's land near the fenceline here. I began negotiations, and it seemed possible, but I have also to say that between DOC and Transit New Zealand and the Rodney Council everything seems to have gone into abeyance in the meantime."

We hit the beach. Bill Ward was a strategic thinker, and encouraged me to leave him as we walked around the rocky headland back to Waiwera. I was younger, faster, I could go ahead, pick up my pack where I'd left it at the general store and we'd remeet in the main street.

I joined up with him there just as a young drunk, cigarette in one hand, stubby in the other, reeled out of the pub towards us. It was the kind of scene the 90s has taught you not to get involved with, but Bill Ward went right up to him, hovered over him, peered into his face.

"Are you alright?"

The young man ignored his inquisitor and staggered on.

Bill Ward stayed poised in position for a moment, then half-turned looking after the youth. He answered the question himself.

"Hmnnnn. I don't think so. I don't think so."

I accepted an invitation to stay the night. Bill Ward and his daughter Rosemary had a condominium apartment on the Waiwera waterfront with its own thermal pool. Rosemary served tea, we were getting on well, and I was regaling the table with anecdotes from the trail and the internet stories that had become part of it, when I suddenly felt the same cool gaze upon me that had transfixed the young drunk from the pub.

"A shame," said Ward. "I thought you and I were absolutely of the same mind on trails but I can see you have an over-excited mind."

It was such an extraordinary judgement, that I seized on it and prefaced subsequent remarks with the phrase: "Despite my overexcited mind, I believe . . ."

But he never mentioned it again. Bill Ward had carefully built up a rubber goods firm out of Dunedin, then sold it. Part of the money went to the Waiwera Child Trust which had spent over \$1 million on camps for disadvantaged children. He was a man who did things, and he was a helpful man - as I set off the next



morning to rock-hop around to Orewa on the low tide, Ward suggested I leave the full pack with him and he'd bring it round by car. I arrived at Orewa an hour and a half later, and he pulled in within minutes of my arrival to hand over the pack, shake hands, wish me luck for the remainder of the journey, and to promise we'd meet again.

I walked over the hill to Silverdale, crossed under the bridge there and stared at the Wade River. It was a creek really, and we'd put it into Te Araroa because the right-hand bank from Silverdale to Duck Creek, and beyond that to Stillwater itself, will be developed by Rodney District Council as a walkway. That makes sense - such a walk would connect up with DOC's existing Okura walkway making a continuous trail all the way to metropolitan Auckland.

I think it was the novelist Maurice Gee who warned that New Zealand creeks are, as a psychological landscape, our darkest places. Creek mud is viscous. Its eels are slippery. Its water is dun-coloured. Creeks are backdoor places, with industrial ooze, and they can be deadly: as a boy, Gee watched someone die in a creek, diving in to impress his girl, his head gone and his legs stuck in the sky.

Let me add to the list. German-made mud poles get no traction in creeks. The spats that keep the rubbish out of the tops of your boots in bush don't work in creeks. 23 kg packs are just a deadweight in creeks. The pride at completing Te Araroa's toughest sections can get blown out your ear by creeks.

On this walk, I'd developed the legs of a pit pony. But strength is nothing without traction. Most soft surfaces - bark chips, say, or sand - yield slightly, then compress underfoot. Not the Wade River mud: boot one sank into it. Boot two, trying to raise boot one, slowly embedded itself deeper than boot one. Boot one then became the only means of raising boot two, but . . . look, I won't go on. Suffice it to say that while thus slowly making my way deeper into, rather than further along, the Wade, I registered a disconcerting fact. The creek's water level, pushed by a distant incoming tide in the estuary, was visibly rising.

Arghhhh! I threw sideways a superhuman distance, grabbed the branch of a distant mangrove, and pulled myself slowly free.

I looked at the through routes. The mud beside the rising river? Forget it. The mangroves? Too dense. The banks beyond the mangroves and the mud? Too tangled.

And I quit. That's right - quit.

Look - I had a city to reach, a plane to catch okay? I went back, and walked around by road.

My wife Miriam caught up with me on the Stillwater Road, took the pack into her car, and, aside from the thick mud still caking my boots, I sped weightless on toward Stillwater, then on around the Stillwater-Okura Estuary walk in under half the allotted DOC time.



**The sunrises over Rangitoto  
Rangitoto - a symbol of Auckland**

At 8.30 pm, I first set foot over North Shore City's boundary - the northern boundary of metropolitan Auckland. The first third of Te Araroa's North Island trail was complete.

Now, I had a plane to catch.

## #23 Interlude

*Te Araroa marches on the spot to the beat of a distant, and operatic, drum*

One of the unpleasant side-effects of turning from reviewer to practitioner is that you become more tolerant of others' faults.

Just before starting Te Araroa, I reviewed for the *New Zealand Herald* the American writer Bill Bryson's new book on hiking the Appalachian Trail, *A Walk in the Woods*.

Bryson broke his trail journey for a book launch (though he also, unfortunately I think, decided the AT was just too long and didn't walk all the trail). Criticising those stops he made, and the book's general lack of momentum, I wrote words which come back to clout me now: "A trail book is a river movie: don't stop too long at the wharf."

Catch this rope! Tie it on! I need to lie up until early March. The reason is two-fold. Beyond Auckland, the trail goes down the publicly-owned stopbanks of the Waikato River. That requires negotiation, both with the regional authority Environment Waikato which owns the stop-banks, and with individual farmers whose leases do not presently have a public access clause and who do not have to let a tramp through.

The second and for the moment more compelling reason is the beginning of a new opera. With Jack Body, the Wellington musician, I wrote the libretto for the new opera *Alley* to be performed in the State Opera House February 27, 28 and March 1 at the opening of the New Zealand International Festival of Arts,

It is an unconventional opera with a terrific, risky, history. It was late 1996, we were just beginning, and I remember Jack pointing to the moon, saying: "Better to try, and fall flat on your arse, than not to try at all."

We did try. We did fall flat on our arses. The New Zealand International Festival of the Arts accepted the opera and planning was well down the track to bring in musicians and singers from China, a director Chen Shi-Zheng from New York, and the Australian opera star Lyndon Terracini, when Creative New Zealand refused any funding beyond \$50,000.

That money was insufficient, but when everyone protested, we lost the \$50,000 altogether. For months the opera was in crisis, and it finally went ahead - extraordinarily for a big production - on private funding.

The opera is based on the life of Rewi Alley, the New Zealand soldier and farmer who spent 60 years in China. Alley did great deeds and won great honour there, and at his death in 1987 was the best-known foreigner in the country. We dramatised the story by setting it in the hour of his death - a freewheeling hallucinatory state where anything can happen, and where a final and threatening judgement awaits.

Old Alley - played by Martyn Sanderson - sits in his chair. All the action that takes place behind this isolated figure is hallucination or dream. Behind the Old Alley is the Young Alley, played by Terracini, who sings of his shaping experiences in China, his vision of Chinese industrial co-operatives and his desert school in Gansu. A chorus of 20 mainly Asian and Polynesian dancers sings work songs, and give the opera its massed peasant action. Two Gansu folk singers, Li Guizhou, and Ji Zhengzhu, sing the songs that Alley listened to at night before huge coal fires in his isolated school. Chen Shi-Zheng, who has trained in traditional Chinese opera, not only directs, but takes the part of the Chinese God of Death, Yen Wang, inquisitor of Alley as he faces the final judgement.

I went to Wellington for part of the rehearsals. The pictures that follow are from the beginning of

rehearsals at Victoria University's School of Music. The singers are not yet in costume - though Sanderson has an uncanny natural likeness to Alley, and Terracini will be made over to narrow the gap - and the Chinese musicians have not yet arrived from Beijing.



The Gansu folk singers, Li Guizhou and Ji Zhengzhu, listen while Professor Du Yaxiong, a Beijing musicologist and translator on the project, Jack Body, and director Chen Shi-Zheng make a point on performance. (The folk singers had never been far outside their villages, and paddled for the first time in the ocean after getting out of a car at Seatoun.)



Director Jack Body exits as Chen Shi-Zheng prepares to rehearse and Lyndon Terracini awaits the call behind.



The chorus dances in rehearsal with bamboo poles



Terracini and Sanderson as Young and Old Alley during a scene of accusation near the opera's climax.

I will attend the opening, but back in Auckland the pack stands ready to resume the trail.

## #24 Auckland

*Te Araroa walks with a crowd, revisits chaos, crosses a swamp, and learns a lesson from the Trans Canada Trail - how to beg for money*



Three runners go past us at the base of the dune, then stop, climb the flank of it, proffer Bob Harvey their camera and ask him to take a photograph.

This is a complex moment. I sprint to a vantage point beyond the runners and take a photo of the photo being shot. I am pleased with this picture. It has stark lines, depth, and clarity. Its rising dune makes a natural centre of its subject, the Waitakere City mayor. Yet, it has an air of strangeness. The mayor is bonded to the group by the very act of photographing it, but he is not one of them. The men are shining with sweat. The photo's power derives from its impervious surfaces, and I hesitate to break those surfaces by too much description - *this is how we got here, this is what happened next*. Hesitate to make of it a movie instead of a still. For the moment just let it stand, glowing, the sun and long shadows of a west coast morning eternally present, and entitle it only: *Te Araroa: The Runners*.

There has been a lot of strangeness lately. Three days before, as librettist for the *Alley* opera, I'd stood on the State Opera House stage in Wellington with Jack Body while the applause washed down from the blackness. Strangeness - the rag doll bow, falling forward from the waist, arms limp, hands brushing the stage. Finding then my hand grasped, held aloft in triumph and - I looked around - it was Yen Wang himself, Chinese God of Death, who held it, his face shining white, his eyes sparkling black, saying: *It is okay Geoff, it is okay, it is very very good*. These are not normal times.

Abnormal times. From this pinnacle I'd come back to Auckland, arms stiff, earmuffs

on, holding the mower steady as I ground up and down the 14th lawn that day. I was mowing suburban lawns to bring in a bit of quick money. The boots were spattered with chlorophyll, and the macerated ordure of dogs.

But back to the maps. Back to Te Araroa. Back to the newly beeswaxed boots. Back to getting permissions. My God! I hope Tranz Rail - the former New Zealand Railways, now owned by Wisconsin Central Transportation Corporation, but doing its business on New Zealand land - is not going to get in the way.



Te Araroa's plan offers a loop track around Auckland, and therefore a choice for getting through the metropolis. Choice one: down the North Shore City Council's East Coast Bays walk, coming through on the Devonport ferry to Auckland City's Coast-to-Coast walk to Onehunga and so into Manukau City.

Choice two: Crossing the top of Auckland along North Shore City's proposed green belt to Paremoremo Reserve, walking through the Riverhead Forest to Kumeu, then down the rail corridor to Waitakere township. From there, the track enters Waitakere City, meets the network of tracks in the Waitakere Ranges to link with the west coast before following Auckland City's Manukau Harbour walk to Manukau City.

You are an east coast person, or you are a west coast person - choose. I was raised in the Waitakere Ranges. I had no choice.

Two permissions were needed to do the western route. I rang Carter Holt Harvey for permission to walk the Riverhead Forest, and got it. Then I rang Tranz Rail's head office to seek permission for the rail-line walk. I'd held out some hope on this. When designing the North Island trail I'd proposed that the rail corridor between Mercer and Te Kauwhata, bisecting as it does the second largest wetland in the North Island, Whangamarino, would make a good route if we could get the sponsorship to put in a safe walking trail.

Tranz Rail said no - the corridor was too narrow. But a letter from its Corporate Relations Manager, Fred Cockram, seemed to hold out some hope for Tranz Rail's co-operation elsewhere. It invited our trust to identify sections of the rail corridor where there was an access road or a foot track, in which case, "*where no more appropriate route for the trail could be found, Tranz Rail is prepared to consider ways in which access could be provided. Under no circumstances could we consider access where it would be necessary for people to walk on the track or ballast. We could not allow the trail to cross bridges unless those bridges had a*



*designated footpath."*

Fair enough. But as Te Araroa's forward scout on this western route through Auckland, and knowing as I did that the rail corridor Kumeu-Waitakere is wide and fairly straight, I expected to wangle permission.

This was my mood when I contacted Fred Cockram again. I sought permission to walk it. I would, I said, make very clear in any subsequent writing that such a walk was to reconnoitre only, and should not be attempted by the public until a proper trail might be laid.

Cockram was less encouraging this time. The company's attitude had, he said, hardened up since his letter, but he'd put the matter in front of the relevant people.

Phillip Murray the manager of rail operations in Auckland rang back a few days later to say no.

"It sounds nice, but it's not a good idea," said Murray. "I manage about 70-odd drivers here and the number of people walking on the track worries them. We spend hours out at West Auckland schools telling the kids to stay off the track."

I rang Dan Cameron, acting chief executive of the New Zealand Railways Corporation that owns the rail corridor and leases it to Tranz Rail on a 40-year term. He confirmed Tranz Rail had the right to prohibit people from the corridor as it presently existed, and also to decide whether a future walking track, properly separated, could use the corridor. "It's completely and utterly Tranz Rail's call."

Well, put all that on the back burner for the moment. Let's turn instead to Auckland. There are few countries in the world that have a third of their population packed into the one metropolis. Reykjavik, the capital of Iceland, is one, but the concentration there is explicable - extensive hot springs exist in the city, while outside of it there's nothing but black volcanic plateaux, ice and snow. The reasons for Auckland's magnetic effect on a population that inhabits a lush and productive country is less clear: the need for the denizens of any isolated land mass to form a significant crowd?

Whatever, there are people everywhere here, and cars, but also green belts through the cities and through walks. Te Araroa has used those, and the trails in the big regional parks.

I found myself walking now, in this populous place, with friends. Starting from Okura Estuary, Miriam and I picked up the trail at Lonely Track Road, and followed, as closely as is presently possible, North Shore City's proposed green belt on the northern margin of the city. That led through Albany, and down Lucas Creek where the council presently has reserve strip most of the necessary distance. The creek was not yet walkable, so we came up the road parallel to it, then down past the jail, to Paremoro Reserve.





There, Robin Callard joined us. He is an old friend, who'd come out from England to attend the opening of the *Alley* opera and to see his family. By a slightly bizarre chance he was staying for the last two days of his visit at his sister's house - just a few hundred metres from Te Araroa's trail - and we walked on through Riverhead Forest together to Kumeu.

Next day, Callard and I set out together from there. Our friendship goes back to 1971, through correspondence chess games, letters, more lately e-mails on the trail, and there was plenty to talk about.

"So," I enquired after some hours, after the talk had drifted over mutual friends, English law on footpaths, his two marriages, my one, and after I'd thought how satisfactory a long walk is, allowing time for conversation, for thought, and for airing any topic, "what's going on at the office?"

"I think I was talking to you when we did Ball Pass," said Callard, "about chaos theory."

I remembered that crossing of Mt Cook's flank. It was 1993, the last time we'd walked together. We'd hit the Ball Pass snow-line just as a blizzard began, and a playful gust of wind had blown away our map. Neither of us knew the terrain, and though we were well equipped, it had been a hard traverse.

I remembered chaos. The weather. Even away from the ridges, the fierce wind turned our dome tent into a continually heaving silver jelly. Chaos theory suggested some systems were so complex they were intrinsically unpredictable. A favourite example of chaos theory had been the impossibility of ruling out, in seeking the cause of a hurricane, the influence of a butterfly landing on a tower in Tokyo.

Callard was a scientist. He'd won a Nuffield Fellowship to London, and gained some scientific notice by becoming the first person to get a full antibody response, *in vitro*, with tissue culture. He was now a professor at the Institute of Child Health, part of the University College of London, specialising in human immunology.

What was going on at the office? He'd been kicking ahead the latest incarnation of chaos theory - the so-called non linear dynamics. He spent the next hour explaining it - the same problem, complexity that beggared exact prediction, but more sophisticated in its solutions now, using mathematical modelling. As we reached the bush he gestured at the mass of Waitakere green.

"Think of the non-linear interactions going on out there."

I thought, I quailed.

"Do you wish," said Callard as we entered the Waitakere Parkland near where Miriam and I come every year at dusk to spot the native long-tailed bat "you hadn't asked what was going on at the office?"

I picked up the trail next day from Anawhata, walked through to Piha, and met another old friend at the top of Piha Hill.



Des Dubbelt, now aged in his 70s, former editor of *Playdate* magazine, is a fit and keen walker, and it was a great pleasure to sit down, drink tea from his Thermos, and devour more than my share of the bran biscuits and apricot squares he'd packed. Des loves both books and music and was an early influence on my life.

He'd been following the web stories, even hauling out the atlas to follow exact routes. He was also ready to make stylistic comparisons between Geoff Chapple, Jonathan Raban, and Paul Theroux. He's always been good like that, and I'd like to say, though no-one ever hears him because he's musically hermetic - that he's also an accomplished classical pianist. We walked and talked out way down the bush trails to Karekare.

Next morning was a Sunday and I arrived at Bob Harvey's Karekare bach for a solid breakfast of eggs, bacon, baked beans, toast and jam, and cups of tea. Big feed right? We thought we might get as far as Titirangi, via Whatipu and Huia.

"Are you taking water Bob?" I asked seeing an obvious gap as he packed his kete. "No," said the Mayor of Waitakere City proudly. "I'll drink from the streams - they're giardia-free."

We came up to the surf club. The club's annual swim around Paratahi Island 750 metres out from the beach, had been staged just yesterday. The swim was always tense, the IRBs on full alert, for the swells that continually massage the sides of the saw-toothed volcanic remnant are big, and the surrounding currents dangerous.

"Good party!" called Harvey to a small group out sunning themselves on the surf club deck. Released after the tensions of the Paratahi swim, the surf club had roared on into a boozy west coast night.

"It was a great party," confided Harvey, waving at the group. "I'm glad the Lady Mayoress was not in attendance last night, she would have led me away by the ear."

The clubbies waved back at their surfie emeritus, called greetings, and the mayor

ambled on over the black sand, defining himself:

"I'm so old, I'm legendary. I'm 57. To have patrolled one beach for 43 of those years, to have taken on every job from club captain to club-house janitor is probably somewhat stupid. And every year there's the Paratahi swim. It's no shame to say you're not going to do it this year, but you do. It's a test. Some of us are crazy for a month beforehand. The thing looms in your imagination and your fear. I nearly died last year - the waves were just bloody massive."

"Yesterday? I got into a rip and went south into what is called The Wasteland - the strip between Karekare and Whatipu. I came ashore, to be honest, a bit stuffed but alive. I'd done the island."

Harvey has always invested Waitakere's west coast with magnitude. He has surfed it, written about it, even retreated to it with a sleeping bag after those overseas trips with their exhausting mayoral schedules, reviving himself with a night of surf sounds and the Southern Cross.

His enthusiasm for this coast is boundless. As we rounded the headland he pointed out the clifftop ahead. There, on a clear day, you could pick up the dot of snow that was Mt Taranaki shining above a sea horizon.

At the base of that cliff was a field of reeds.

"I'm not into crystal gazing, or the men in dark suits, but I believe this is where a flying saucer landed," he said. "These reeds were pressed down flat in a 20 metre circle. That was in 1990. They were interwoven. They were absolutely flat, and they stayed down, as if they'd been under a 1000-tonne commercial press. You could try to lift one reed off another and you couldn't make an impression. Clubbies are not superstitious, but everyone who came here knew it was very strange. It was like ten elephants had come and rolled in a circle. Twenty elephants."

We came through a tunnel cut into rock - part of the old railway that hauled kauri along the foreshore - and Harvey pointed right.

"That old boiler. Abandoned. Apparently it was too big to go through - but I think they were after the insurance."

We walked on. The runners caught us, stopped and posed for their photograph, and then we entered the swamp. There are two ways to Whatipu. The long way round is to stay on the beach. The short route is a trail through the huge wetland that has collected between the cliffs and the beach.

"This is the trail," said Harvey. Then a little later: "This was the trail but we've had rain. I can no longer see the trail."

The supposed track deepened into what seemed like a main channel, and we branched away sideways into the reeds. All the delights of the swamp gathered to greet us. Thick slime, heated by the sun, slid hot past our thighs, uneven channels underfoot caused us to sink and stumble, reeds grew so tall that frequently I could see no more of the mayor - just 15 metres in front and still graciously providing

leadership - than his head.

But look - he was having fun. The swamp weed sometimes grew so dense that you could walk on it. These mats of floating vegetation, so thick that Lake Titicaca itself would be proud to have them, allowed you to spring pneumatically forward, apparently no more than ankle deep.

"I am walking on water, I am walking on water," cried Harvey throwing his hands up in hallelujah mode as he progressed across these bits.

The weed slowly thinned and gave way.

"I have lost the faith! I have lost the faith," cried the mayor of Waitakere sinking slowly back to a waist-deep wade. We finally splashed our way through to dry sand, and collapsed. Giardia-free or not, you wouldn't drink what we'd just come through, and Harvey quenched himself from my water-bottle.



We made Whatipu hours later than we'd planned, called in to the Whatipu Lodge for a cup of coffee, then set off up the Omanawanui Bush Track. The views out onto the Manukau bar are spectacular, and Harvey, as usual, was full of relevant stories, in this case, the wreck of the *Orpheus* on the Manukau Bar in 1863 - "The wrong charts - an early Erebus."

I'd always been curious about a swim he'd done across the mouth of Manukau Harbour in the 1980s, and asked him about it.

"We started from that beach over there" - he pointed across. The mouth was barely three kilometres wide and immense tonnages of tidal water squeezed through the gap, filling or emptying the great harbour beyond.

"We were swept out, then the tide turned in the middle of the swim, and it was like a massive underwater eggbeater. We were above it, but underneath there was a feeling like the biggest turbines in the world were turning. We were part of it, then released, and borne onto the beach down there."

Just before Huia, the mayor cribbed the last of my water to slake the thirst of his dog, then was taken off by car to catch the Elton John-Billy Joel concert. I kept walking.



In the cities, rendezvous were easier to arrange, and my next companion was Doug Campbell. Campbell is Canadian, one of the foundation committee that got the Bruce Trail - a 780 km track along the Niagara Escarpment - established. Then he turned his attention, in the 1970s, to a national hiking trail. It would go coast to coast, 10,000 km of it. He became secretary of the National Trail Association of Canada, an organisation that has, to date, signed about 1,800 km of trail.

As we set off he showed me the literature for his group's own National Trail, but also the glossier publication on a project that could be seen as a rival, the Trans Canada trail.

"Trans Canada's idea is a multi-use trail: hiking, biking, horse-riding, and in places snow-mobiles. Look at the sponsors!" He spread out the newsletter "Chrysler. Canadian Airlines. TSN, the sports channel. They are putting millions into promotion, television commercials and that kind of thing."

The Trans Canada trail already had a route - unused railway corridors - across two of Canada's 10 provinces. It was also negotiating - Trans Rail please note - rail corridors that were already in use.

The Trans Canada Trail had been going only a few years, born from the same group of can-do entrepreneurs that got the Montreal Olympics financed. One of their bright ideas was to sell metres of track for \$36 each. Contributors were given a certificate and a promise that their name - or the name of a nominee - would be inscribed within the planned trail-side shelters.

"They have raised by that method alone well over a million dollars," said Campbell. "They've got the money, they've got the big sponsors. They will get across Canada first."

I asked if the two trails organisations had done any talking.

"We have," said Campbell. "In the west we are starting to converge, but in places where our trail is established they have chosen to go by a different route, which is a little tough. But I support both trails."

We walked and talked on through the Panto, the Parau, and the Pipeline tracks before gaining Exhibition Drive, a flat road into Titirangi, closed to vehicles, and, as the evening drew in, convivially filled with people cycling, jogging, or out walking the dog.

I touched a pole outside Lopdell House in Titirangi to mark the spot of my next

beginning, said goodbye to Doug Campbell and, since this was still Auckland, drove home. The Trans Canada Trail had given me an idea. The money that had kept me going on Te Araroa - about \$180 per week - had now run out, yet I still had a good three months of trail exploration and writing to complete.

More lawn-mowing to get together the readies? A binge on Scratch Kiwi and Lotto tickets? The Sky Tower casino? A balaclava and a bank? There was a certain amount of desperation in this. If any reader feels moved, a cheque made out to Te Araroa Trust, with a note to specify it should go to G. Chapple, and posted to Te Araroa Trust, PO Box 5106, Wellesley Street, Auckland, New Zealand, would help keep the walk, and its regular reports rolling. Receipts will be issued.

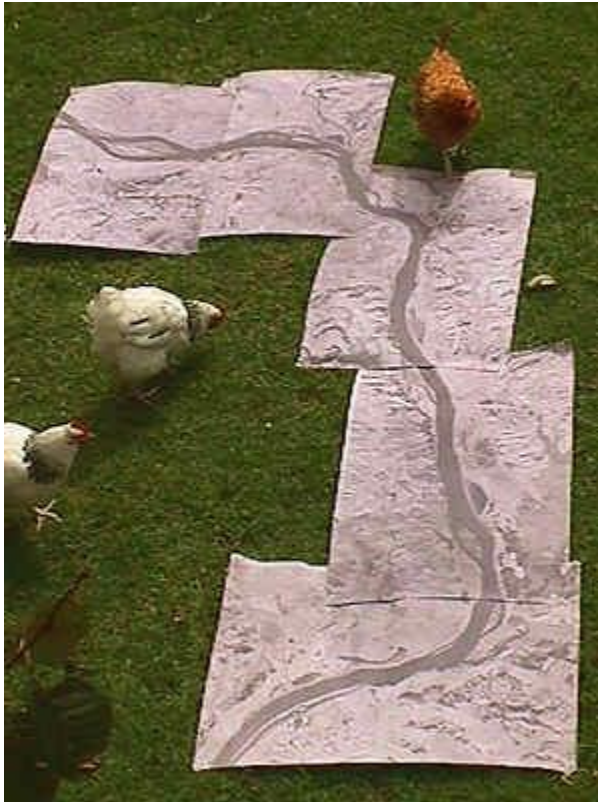
Okay gang - how about it?



## The North - Section 5: Auckland - Te Kuiti

### #25 Auckland - Rangiriri

*Te Araroa shakes the dust off its shoes and ventures south, to greet the mighty Waikato*



I kept walking through Auckland, from Titirangi to Green Bay and over a hill-top track to Blockhouse Bay. But I ended each day's walk early, marking my place with a gouge in the sand or a scrape on the road and going home. Two things preoccupied me. The first was money - I was broke. I'd put out an internet appeal - would anything come in?

The second thing was the Waikato River. It seemed like time to open the banks of the great river to the walking public, and our blueprint for a national trail had put in 60 km of its riverbank. But what were the practical difficulties? How would the farmers respond? Come to think of it - who were the farmers? The Waikato River section would require the most complex set of permissions of the walk so far, and needed advance work.

I rang Terry McDonald, the Property Services Programme Manager for Environment Waikato. I wanted first to walk from Meremere to Rangiriri, some 20 kilometres up the eastern bank of the river. As the regional authority responsible for flood control, Environment Waikato administered stopbanks along this side of the Waikato. What were the chances of walking it, and what were the chances for a national trail here?

"There's a general feeling that we'll be facing increasing pressure for public access along the waterways," McDonald agreed. "If Environment Waikato was going to allow a walkway to be finalised along the bank, the wording of the grazing leases would have to be changed, that would have to be a council decision, and we would take legal advice."

Okay - our trust would make a submission seeking exactly that - but what about right now? Right now, access was still in the hands of the farmers who had taken up EW grazing leases, said McDonald.

"But you should test it. What we have here is a set of aerial photos of the land the council administers for flood control, and a schedule of the farmers who have grazing rights on that land. I'll mark in the boundaries, and if you want to contact them, it's easy. I'll send them up."

Next day I walked through to Mangere Bridge. It was late afternoon. A runner who'd passed me coming along Orpheus Drive was consulting his watch before making the return run, and I asked him about the pedestrian thoroughfares that went through to Manukau City.

"Don't use the subway under Mangere Bridge," he said. "You can get mugged in there any time of the day."

"I didn't plan to. I'm going down this side of the harbour to Otahuhu."

"That's a long way - five or six kays at least."

"That's okay."

"Yeah, well don't be on that path after dark," he said.

I walked this industrial edge of Auckland city in fading light, and saw only one other person. A vision of carefree strolling had once unrolled itself here. This coastal pathway down the innermost reach of the Manukau Harbour was the smoothest I'd encountered, wide concrete running through green grass, edged sometimes with low, basalt walls. In three places, wide stone steps gave access down to the mud and mangroves, as if someone had once wanted this to be Mission Bay. The trail finally lifted over the Otahuhu shunting yards on a concrete footbridge, and came down between industrial fencing onto Hugo Johnson Road. It was an unmarked exit. Here began, and ended, perhaps the most beautifully-laid yet the most little-known trail in Auckland.

I went home by bus. In response to the Internet appeal, a \$25 cheque had come in. The donor was a superannuitant. I was pleased, revived by the gesture. A big package had also come through from Environment Waikato. Now I had aerial photos of the river, I had a list of farmers, and I got on the horn.

"Mr Riddell? My name is Geoff Chapple. I'm walking off-road to Wellington and I'd like to walk through your farm, on the stopbanks."

That was fine by Basil Riddell. The electric fences needed to be taken down and re-hooked on the way through - "Some of the duck shooters aren't good at that. They get one shock and seem to go quite paranoid. Instead of trying to unhook the fences they throw lumps of wood at them and they finish up buried under rubbish."

One further question. It was one I would put to everyone I rang. What was his attitude to a national trail coming along the Waikato on exactly the route I'd asked to walk? That was okay by Basil Riddell. "Keep walking," he said as he hung up. "And get the rest of them out of their hospital beds and walking with you." Good one. I punched in the next number . . .

I walked on into Manukau City through Otara, out of the city on Redoubt Road, and on towards Clevedon. I hitch-hiked home. More calls to the Waikato. The response was stunning. Every farmer said yes to my walk, and yes also to the proposal for a national trail. True, I was dealing with publicly-owned land - but not always. The Entwisle farm for example lay on the route but was not marked on the EW schedule. It had riparian rights down to the river.

"That's right, we've got two kilometres of river frontage down there," said Malcolm Entwisle when I rang, "and I would encourage a dedicated walkway along the river. I'd very much like it."

The only exception was Meremere Dragway Racing. They had the property at the very start of the

proposed Mercer-Rangiriri section, and had extended it to the river with a grazing lease.

"One-offs we don't mind, and we don't mind you" said manager Jude Keven. "but we spend a lot of money on security for our sheds. We wouldn't want just anybody walking through."

It was time, seriously, to set out again. I walked up Ness Valley then Moumoukai Hill Road to the Hunua Range and camped there. I had the full pack again. I had a packet of instant noodles and two packets of pasta in there somewhere, all I could afford, but it felt good to be under way again. I boiled the noodles, then went to sleep with the darkness, listening to the big hills amplify the deep rumble of jets coming into Auckland International Airport.



I walked through the Hunuas on Keeney and Waterline Roads, past the Mangatawhiri Reservoir, and onto the Lower Mangatawhiri track. I'd already organised my exit out from the hills through farmland owned by Keith and Shirley Matheson, and the two gave me a meal that night, and a bed.

Next day I walked down to the Mangatawhiri River. Auckland DOC had stopbanks on the river that ran 10 km through from SH2 to SH1 just below Mercer, and we'd put that walk into Te Araroa's blueprint.

Big squalls blew up from the west. The stopbanks gave a low view across maize that stretched as far, and that right now looked as sinister, as a van Gogh cornfield. The horizon went dark, the birds fled, and advance winds shook the million dry heads of the maize. I was caught in driving rain for 30 minutes, without shelter, before falling into an open-ended half-round barn set in the maize fields, looking around me at the sort of stuff that creates modern crops. Piles of urea sacks. A mountain of empty plastic containers, with striped hazard warnings, and the legend: *Miscellaneous dangerous substances*. Atrazine - "residual herbicide for the control of broadleaf weeds." Trophy "for selective pe-emergence weed control in maize and sweetcorn."



The weather eased, and I left the shed of poisons. The Mangatawhiri's boggy margins broadened into an extensive wetland. The stopbank curved right, away from the river. I followed it round to a group of workers putting a polyurethane coating on the rimu floor of a cabin overlooking the wetland. Strange - this small beautifully built structure in the midst of a wet wilderness. What was it?

A hunting lodge. This was duck country, the duck-shooting season opened in May, and the lodge would be ready for it. David Richwhite of merchant bankers Fay Richwhite & Co was personally overseeing the finishing touches, flying down with his designer in the big Kawasaki chopper.

I waded a tributary and went on beside the Mangatawhiri. By 6 p.m. I'd reached Mercer, once a major

Waikato river port, formerly also what the old New Zealand Railways called a "refreshment" stop for its passenger trains. This was the place where A.R.D. Fairburn, looking into his NZR cup once famously commented, parodying Portia in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*: "The squalid tea of Mercer is not strained."

Well they serve good coffee in Mercer now. River port? No longer. Trainstop? No sir. Mercer has always set itself to snare passing traffic, but did so now as an American-style one-stop highway shop. High signs soliciting the passing stream. Gas. Food. Coke. The golden bummy "M" of McDonalds. I went in. I ate at the Pokeno Bacon Company stall and I asked around - was there anywhere to stay? No. The old pub was closed. Camping grounds. Nix. The people I spoke to weren't locals, and weren't that concerned. Amidst these concreted pavilions where cars and trucks wheeled and sped back onto the highway, there was no quality of mercy for the unhorsed.

It was dark by the time I'd finished eating, and I explored the town on both sides of the rail line before deciding to pitch camp on a hill - a paddock belonging to the local church I learned later. I rang home. A \$500 donation had come in. Also a \$200 one. Wonderful. I could keep eating. I finished the day looking down on the bright stream of light along the highway, then the clanging and flashing of the crossing bells, the eerie light of its approach, and the thundering through of the locomotive.

I had now to get to Meremere, five kilometres south. The highway runs right next to the river, and though a riverside trail might be possible alongside, there's nothing more right now than a tangle of vines and willows. A five kilometre walk along Highway One was unavoidable.

I set out - I kept my head down. What is it about a big highway that encourages the biff? Your *Motown Favourites* tape has just bust its leader - biff it. You've finished your packet of Holiday cigarettes - biff it. Your cut can of beer - biff it. Your empty bottle of sprite - biff it. Your H2GO with the neat nipple top? Biffed. Your toothbrush? Biffed. Your teddybear in a long-ago act of vengeance when Mum wasn't watching - biffed. Your Time Out, and Snickers, and Picnic candy bar wrappers? Biffed. Your bikini top? Plucked away by the highway wind while drying, or simply biffed? Who knows?

I blanched at the Whangamarino River bridge - too narrow both for the traffic stream blatting through, and the man with the pack. I hand-over-handed along the outside of it, hanging onto the rail. Beyond, the roadside rubbish continued, and other verbs of dispensation came to mind. Cigarette butts by the thousand - flicked away. Windscreen glass, some with current registration stickers still attached under the shattered glass - punched out. Rubber gloves off the back of work trucks - blown. Onions - spilled. Scraps of retread rubber - thrown. Plastic hubcaps - bowled.

And there were the poignant roadside crosses, some with ceramic angels taped to them, or with delicately veined metal butterflies symbolising the souls that had taken wing here. Crosses with revolving windmill flowers, with stay-bright plastic flowers, or with real flowers that were dried and dead and shook in the blasts of wind as the big transports rushed past. Finally I reached the sideroad that led down to Meremere Dragstrip Racing and walked through farmland behind the raceway to the Waikato River.

Stories thrive on difficulty and conflict. We want and don't want too much harmony, nor a surfeit of friendliness, nor too much yogic dovetailing with nature. If I can digress for a moment, the river epic, as a literary form was pioneered during an early expedition up South America's Orinoco River. Sir Walter Raleigh led that river expedition, and headed up his journal, published in 1596, *The Discoverie of the large and beautifull Empire of Guianna, with a relation of the great and golden citie of Manoa (which the Spaniards call El Dorado)*. He was seeking, for his Queen, the greatest destination of all - El Dorado - and his journal became the prototype for all the subsequent upstream imperial epics - Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, for one, or, if you like, Francis Coppola's movie *Apocalypse Now*.

The upstream epic has distinct dramatic stages: typically the way is barred, then there are a succession of dangers - alligators, blow-pipe darts, but the traveller enters then a tropical Arcadia and is nourished by native hospitality. Finally, El Dorado lies within reach but an impassable waterfall, a savage tribe, a terrible illness, a final barrier of some sort forces the traveller back with just a few tokens of a more fabulous wealth. Raleigh, after enormous tribulation and a passage through all these stages, after willful poetic embroidery of his tale to include men whose heads grew beneath their shoulders, brought back to Queen Elizabeth 1 from the Orinoco only some spar bearing traces of gold.

So to the the Waikato River - glinting there beyond those riverside saplings. My way was not barred - I had permissions all the way through. Before me the stopbank stretched ahead like some tramper's green and soft and narrow equivalent of Highway One. Birds sang. Trees soughed. Dandelions looked up with their appealing little yellow faces and bronze-winged crickets hopped away underfoot - it looked as if this walk up the Waikato River was going to be *extremely pleasant*.

But there were serpents too in this Garden of Eden. Thin long things, 12.5 gauge, carrying a 4000-volt sting. The electric fences.



Every farmer I'd talked to had warned about the electrics. You could use the plastic handles to unhook them, then put them back. The handles didn't always work, but you could tell if the wires were live, put a blade of grass on them and edge your fingers up the grass. If you got a tickle, beware.

The electricity pulsed a second apart. It administered a shock - "like a blow on the shoulders with a cricket bat" as one farmer eloquently described it - and turned you, for exactly 3000th of a second, into a filament bright enough to read by.

I came up to my first fence. I laid on the blade of grass, slid my fingers up. *Jesus Christ!* That was more than a tickle.

I unhooked the top wire, stepped over the bottom wire, re-hooked the top and went on through. I went through electric fences by the dozen and by the time I'd passed through Riddell's farm, I was an electric fence veteran. I went through a farm gate onto the Entwisle property. It was a truly lovely place. Here the river flowed alongside a margin of the English swamp tree, black alder. The grass glowed green beneath, a swathe that ended under a line of tousle-headed cabbage trees and a large grove of the native swamp tree, kahikatea.

I rang up to the farmhouse on the mobile - during our previous conversation, Malcolm Entwisle had invited me to come up for a chat on my way through.





**Barry Pope**

These people did not have heads that grew beneath their shoulders. I met Barry Pope, the farm manager, installing an electric fence. We discussed the pathway on the river flat below.

"It'd work - except when the river floods, a couple of months a year would be the average there. I've seen the river " - he pointed out across a kilometre-wide plain on the Waikato's far side - "spread right to the foot of those hills. It's not dangerous, it's still water, but you have to know where to walk.

"Farmers are conservationists. You can see here we're planting the gullies. We're putting fences around the kahikatea. But the most important thing to a farmer is his stock. Provided a walkway doesn't affect that, I have no problem with it. I think it's an excellent idea."

I went on up to the Entwisle house. Malcolm was out, but Ngaire was in, and made tea. Served cake. Hospitality. The farm is a cattle stud, and we chatted on about the Simmental and the new, French, Aubrac cattle that her farm raises. About trees, and the walks in Germany, in England. She and her husband had travelled the world, and had done a lot of tracks. It was time wasn't it, for a long New Zealand trail, and for the Waikato River to be part of it?

"We're keen walkers ourselves, so we'd be quite accepting of it."



I went on - it was evening as I climbed to the highest point of that day's walk. I watched the river turn to sheet metal in the stillness of evening, glinting back into the distance. I took a call on the mobile: \$2000 had come in. I named that high bluff after my latest benefactor and went on, buoyed by the contribution. The lowing of cattle on the far bank traced the darkening outline of the hills.

I watched the river's huge tonnages of water slip by, absolutely silent, and at the river's edge a giant goldfish - carp is it ? - snatched at the surface briefly and slid away into the weed. Darkness fell. The stock trail I was following led into bush, and I found myself floundering in an unseen bog. No way through



- well, not in darkness anyway - and I pitched camp.

Next day the wind rose, blowing up whitecaps that dissolved back on themselves under the force of the river's flow. I walked on at the river's edge - it was not pretty, this ever-glade edge with its matted aerial roots and rotted trunks and swirling weed, but it had a beauty of its own.

At 3 pm, after dozens more electric fences, a rip in my shorts from barbed wire, after startling duck and geese, and greeting dairy cows, I saw through the trees, a wide corrugated iron roof and painted on it the words Rangiriri Tavern. But remember children, the great truths that are contained in literature. There never was an El Dorado without some difficulty that compounds into a last and terrible test as you approach it.

Bulls! The last long thin kilometre of stop-bank before the Rangiriri Tavern was full of bulls. Big bulls, little bulls. I could have hopped the fence and walked down the adjacent Churchill East Road at this stage, but nah. I unstrapped a Leki stick and went forward, recalling the words of the farmer John Shearer when I'd rung him days before: "There's some bulls in the last strip but they're pretty tame."



The animals watched me, no more than mildly curious as I passed by. One last rain squall drenched me and then I was through, dripping, to the Rangiriri Tavern. Wetness - who cares? For the first time in weeks, I knew my Eftpos card was going to work.

This then is the story of how the Waikato River from Mercer to Rangiriri might be opened to those who enjoy such pleasures. It is the story of how, after a long journey up the river, one can find at the end of it a pint of Speights light ale, and hold it to the light. Golden in colour. It is the story of how I believe this single pint I obtained is peanuts compared to the inexhaustible supply that waits in great subterranean tanks below this river destination, for any future explorers who might be so bold as to make the river journey.

## #26 Battle Station

*Te Araroa climbs a small hill and wanders into Rangiriri's bloody history*

I lugged my pack into the Rangiriri Battle Site Heritage Centre and sat down for a coffee. Paintings of Maori chiefs, etchings of British officers were on the walls. Period uniforms and weaponry were on display behind glass, or were simply supported on wall hooks. The centre also had an audio-visual presentation of the critical battle here in November 1863, between British troops and Waikato warriors. Price \$2.

I paid up, and the centre's manager Suzanne Bonnington put on a showing.

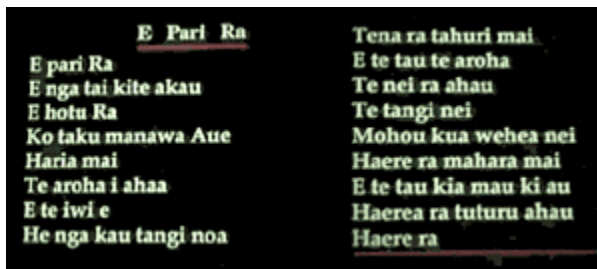


"Being a tea lady has opened my eyes to a lot of things," she said, drawing the blackout curtains. "Conflict starts with the difference between what you think and what you've got. Maori had started the King Movement as an idea - to preserve the material thing, which was the land. The British had another idea . . ."

I watched the audio-visual. The British idea, fundamentally, was that no pan-tribal organisation of strength could be allowed to stand. Governor Sir George Grey set out to destroy the power and disperse the territory of a newly inaugurated Maori king, and Rangiriri was the key battle.

The dead: around 100. Hundreds more suffered the usual crippling wounds, and the amputations without anaesthetic. Mass death in civilian life, the foundering of the Wahine (52 dead) or the lahar-struck Tangiwai Bridge (151 dead) is never forgotten.

Death in the first First and Second World War, is etched everywhere in stone. Yet here - it's like New Zealand had wished it would go away - and there's just this new bit of private enterprise, these small displays, this audio-visual in a small cul-de-sac, with the cars rushing past on the highway beyond.



The credits rolled and a 1930s rendition of *E Pari Ra*, sung by Deane Waretini and Ana Hato filled the dark room. These words up on-screen, these long-ago voices, and the emotion of Maori song - it gave you an unexpected jolt.

An Auckland Grammar School party had arrived by bus. I wanted now to see the battle site itself, and decided to do that with the students of 4A.

I introduced myself to their senior master, Paul Baker, and he turned out to be an historian to his back teeth.

"Ah, Chapple," he said. "Any relation to the Reverend James Chapple?"

"A grandson," I said.

"Hmnnnnn," said Baker. "I was researching the Reverend for a book I did. There's some detail in there that should interest you - hold on."

Baker went off to a display stand at the centre, pulled out his book *King and Country Call - New Zealand, Conscripted, and the Great War*, flipped to the index, then read aloud from a letter my grandfather sent to Charles Mackie, head of the New Zealand Peace Council.

"I am plodding along here in an unpopular cause, crossing the current of opinion."

The Reverend Chapple had been giving his usual sermons: *The Obsolescent Monarchy* and *New Zealand as a Peace Loving Republic*. Lectures like that, delivered in ringing tones during the years of war patriotism 1914-18 do not endear you to your country's leaders. A sedition charge was laid against him.

"One much-respected Paparua prisoner was the Reverend Chapple." Baker had found another index reference, and picked up the story. "Vulnerable to the cold and not up to work he would sit in the sun behind concrete blocks while other prisoners worked and kept a lookout for warders."

"Ah," I said, suddenly aware of genetics, the sun on my back and that while the other wage-slaves had been earning their keep, I hadn't worked for months now.

I filed out with 4A to the Rangiriri Cemetery. The dead British soldiers lay under blank concrete casings. The Auckland Grammar boys had photocopied sheets on the Waikato campaign, and questions to answer. What was the historical mistake, asked one question, in the marble inscription over the gate at the Rangiriri Cemetery? I looked up:

#### Battle of Rangiriri

*On the 20th November 1863 General Cameron with a force of 850 attacked the Maori entrenchments on the crest of the hill to the north of this burial ground. The Maoris, in a strong redoubt, repulsed the naval and storming parties but surrendered next morning. The British casualties were 49 killed and 87 wounded. The Maori losses were about 50 killed and 183 taken prisoner . . . The main road traverses the centre of the Maori position.*

We all drove to the battle site, and walked up a small hill. Sheep grazed there, and a dead sheep was rotting within the trench that still creased the top of the hill. The site was an undulating place, grassed, and unspectacular. Baker began to voice the detail that makes history live a little.

"Right here," he said, "we're standing on part of the redoubt. Why were the British, with artillery, gunboats, and a big numerical advantage, unable to take it in battle?"



**Paul Baker**

The students waited.

"The parapet was five metres high - five metres," said Baker, giving dimensions while 4A scribbled notes. "It was higher than the scaling ladders brought in by the British."

The kids explored, holding their noses past the dead sheep.

"The main trench at our feet here," said Baker, "was 12 feet wide. You'll have to just imagine that. Why can't it just be dug out and this fortification restored? One reason," he said, again answering himself, "is that it may be filled with dead Maori warriors."

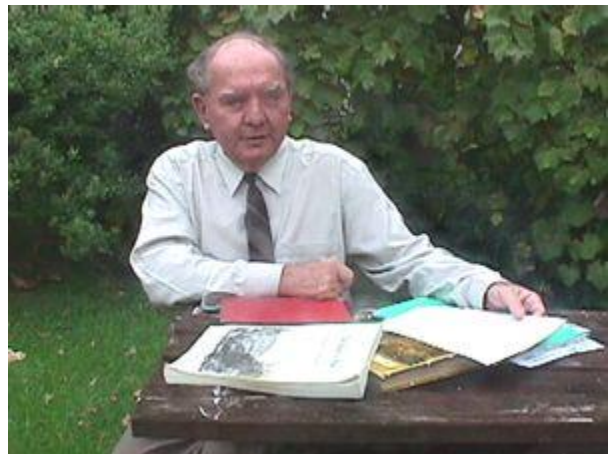
Another reason, I thought, was that no-one cared. Past a light screen of trees, some five metres below us, the high-speed traffic of Highway One was whining through. Roading engineers had cut right through the heart of New Zealand's history.

"It seems a shame that these places can't be brought back to what they looked like," said Baker. "New Zealanders would be a lot more excited about their history if the sites were restored."

Such is the goal of the 70 year-old ex-Indian Army second lieutenant, and ex-New Zealand headmaster, Pat Gaitely, the man who started the heritage centre, who produced and narrated the audio-visual.

In 1983, Gaitely came to Rangiriri with a friend from the Territorials who liked pacing out the ground, and figuring out old battles. They visited the tiny cemetery at Rangiriri with its marble inscription, and nameless graves. Gaitely looked back across the road at the decayed little settlement. The IGA store was empty with a For Sale sign tacked onto it.

"It occurred to me that here was a chance to buy something right on an important battlefield," Gaitely recalled, when I sought him out. "In any other country a site like that would be part of a national park."



**Pat Gaitely**

He bought the store. Street kids were living in it, and subsequently it burned down. Gaitely didn't do much for 10 years, but he did keep watch occasionally on the old graveyard - and counted just two visitors a week stopping to look. Yet the site, he felt, simply needed development. He went over a part of it with a metal detector. In a single hour he found 22 items - musket balls, military buttons, bayonets. He travelled to the USA, and saw the treatment given their battle sites. He considered Rangiriri was New Zealand's Alamo. The site was there - that unspectacular hump - but how did you make it come alive?

The Historic Places Trust persuaded him a straight museum wouldn't work. Gaitely decided to open a heritage centre that would be also a food, drink, and craft stop-off to the highway. He negotiated with local Maori to start waka trips on the river. He had plans to introduce Waikato eel onto the menu. He approached the banks who declined the chance to lend money for a crazy project in a dead village. He went into partnership with Malcolm and Suzanne Bonnington, the three using their own money to open the centre in 1993. "I saw huge potential," says Gaitely, "just waiting."

The visitors to Rangiriri's quiet little graveyard now number 60 a day. Nor has Gaitely stopped. The Rangiriri fortifications, he claims, will be remade. A Maori tapu holds sway on the existing hump, but the key to remodelling Rangiriri is that part of the redoubt where others have already breached the tapu - in 1967, the Ministry of Works widened State Highway One and dug right through the main fortification, filleting the once-bloody earth.

"They found Maori bones," said Gaitely. "They gave the Maori workers on that road a day off, and went

and buried the bones. I've talked to the Ministry of Works people and I've talked to Transit New Zealand to find out where those bones are buried, but so far I haven't found out where they were taken."

"Over the next few years though, they're relocating the highway down by the river. The redoubt can be reconstructed in the area of the old road without fear of disturbing the dead. DOC are going to do it. They've got the money set aside already, and Historic Places Trust and university archaeologists will make sure it's accurate."

Thus Gaitely may finally have his Alamo - Highway One will no longer sweep right through the middle of one of the greatest forts ever built in New Zealand, and a bloody part of New Zealand history may live again.

The history behind Rangiriri is this. In 1840, at Waitangi, Maori and the British Crown had signed a treaty. It gave, in the European view, sovereignty to the British and their colonial administration. But Maori power still prevailed over most of the country, and the exercise of European law within Maori areas was not something that had to be addressed, because it did not occur. By the 1850s though, with land settlement and an increasing number of immigrants, European enclaves were starting to spread. Maori control was under threat even on their own considerable lands, and Maori began to consult on pan-tribal agreements to preserve Maori areas, and Maori power.

In 1858, at Rangiriri, the Waikato chief Potatau Te Wherowhero was inaugurated as Maori king. He had the support of 15 of the 26 major North Island tribes. The King Movement would oppose further land sales and would conduct its business in the Maori way. This Maori territory set down its northern boundary at the Mangatawhiri Stream, just south of Pokeno.

The King Movement was a challenge to British sovereignty, and war was already in the air. From 1860-61, British troops had fought Maori in battles sparked by a disputed block of land at Waitara, Taranaki, and the King Movement had sent warriors in support of Taranaki's Maori fighters.

Governor George Grey saw the Maori king as a threat to empire. A famous quote of Grey's was: "I shall not fight against him with the sword, but I shall dig around him until he falls of his own accord."

Yet the sword was already half-drawn. When Grey began his second term as governor in 1861, the Great South Road out of Auckland ended at Drury. Grey used five regiments of British troops to extend it, and by June 1862 the road was servicing a stockade on the Waikato River and bringing in material for a new fort, the Queen's Redoubt, just south of Pokeno, and close by the northern banks of the Mangatawhiri Stream.

By December 1862 a side-paddle steamer, the *Avon*, was being fitted with armour plate at Onehunga. She was of a size that could navigate the Waikato River. By April 1863, Tainui Maori were fortifying positions at Koheroa, just south of the Mangatawhiri Stream, at Meremere, a few kilometres upriver, and beyond that, at Rangiriri.

By July the Queen's Redoubt at Pokeno was working smoothly and General Cameron advised the Government he had sufficient troops and supplies to attack Maori positions south of Mangatawhiri Stream.

He crossed the stream and on July 17, 1863, personally led a bayonet charge against Maori entrenchments on the hills of Koheroa. Cameron won the battle, losing only two soldiers.

Meremere was next, a far more formidable entrenchment, and Cameron needed to use the river. On July



25 the *Avon* steamed up to meet him.

Cameron reconnoitered Meremere from the *Avon*. The British general didn't like what he saw, and stopped for three months while Maori harassed his supply lines from the bush behind Pokeno, and amused themselves, with military jokes, Wiremu Tamihana at one point sending down-river several large canoes filled with potatoes, turkeys, and goats, a present to the General who, the Waikato chief had heard, was having trouble with his supply lines.



But on October 3, the *Avon* - a comparatively small vessel, 60 feet in length, was joined by a sinister surprise to Maori. The *Pioneer*, a 153 foot gunboat with a shallow draft had been specially built in Sydney for the Waikato. *Pioneer* also had a novel method of protecting itself from close attack. A 3-inch perforated pipe ran the circumference of the vessel, flush with the gunwales and connected to the steam boiler, ready to repel boarders by gushing scalding steam.

Cameron used *Pioneer* to simply leapfrog his troops upriver past Meremere. The Maori position was outflanked, and Waikato warriors abandoned Meremere without a fight. Rangiriri was next.

General Cameron steamed up-river in the *Pioneer* to have a look at it. The fortifications stood at right angles to the river, extending some 400 metres across the narrow neck of land to the swamps and water of Lake Waikare. One of Cameron's aides would dismiss it, following this peep through rifle loopholes, as "just a common embankment thrown up, with a trench cut in front of it also." But Cameron himself respected the sophistication of Maori earthworks. Learning from the first military exchanges against pakeha in the 1840s, Maori strategists had developed pa construction that gave protection from artillery shells, and provided angles of fire for defending riflemen that made storming their main positions lethal.

Cameron planned battle for the afternoon of November 20. He would use the gunboats and armoured barges to shell the Maori redoubt, and to land troops south of Rangiriri. The rest of his troops would advance in skirmish lines and scaling parties from the north. They would advance under covering fire from artillery set up on a northern ridge.

Cameron's total force, including sailors and gunners on the river fleet, was 1488. Around 500-700 Maori, mainly warriors, but including women and children, waited at Rangiriri Pa. Just before the planned drop of soldiers south, river currents swept the troopship, *Pioneer*, out of position. Cameron attacked anyway, his northern guns pounding the pa, and the skirmish lines advancing under fire along a ridge, and along swampy ground and flats where ti-tree were deliberately strewn to impede any charge, and where sharpened stakes jutted under the fern.

British troops finally scrambled off *Pioneer* and took the rear fortifications. The frontal attack, meantime, had breached the Maori line down near the river. The British were through to the central redoubt on two sides, but faced ferocious fire as they ran towards it. Once British soldiers gained the ditch beneath the redoubt they had more protection, for covering fire swept the parapets clear of anyone who leaned over. But the scaling ladders were too short. Close enough to throw hand grenades up into the main redoubt, still the British failed to get more than a few soldiers into the redoubt, and the attack lost momentum. Their losses were heavy, with a high casualty rate of officers, including the mortally wounded commander of the artillery, Captain Mercer, who had charged with sword and pistol and whose jaw had been shot



away.

Night fell. British soldiers waited in the ditch below the redoubt and the Maori were above, able to lean out now, according to one journal "yelling awfully and firing at us."

Taking advantage of darkness, British sappers began digging under the redoubt to blow it up from beneath. Darkness also assisted the escape of the main Waikato chiefs, evacuated to the east, out through the swamps.

So to the surrender. It is this fact in the Rangiriri Cemetery's marble description of events that is wrong, or at least, ambiguous.

Kawhia chief Wiremu Te Kumete, seeing, it has been suggested, the white ensign flying from one of the gunboats, took it to be a signal to parley, and broke out an answering white flag. It was a signal that had been used in Taranaki as a truce, and a beginning to talks.

The British chose to interpret the flag as a surrender, and British soldiers accompanied their officers into the redoubt. It was a defacto takeover, the British took prisoners, and ended the battle.

The New Zealand Army still studies the war strategy at Rangiriri and has issued a sheet for its officers on the battle. It concludes: "Rangiriri had the potential to be a major rebuff to British arms. That it was not was due to:

- a. damp gunpowder, and
- b. tribal difference among the Maori."

The army history accepts the story that Maori asked, at the supposed surrender, for more gunpowder to replenish damp stocks. It also notes that before the battle Rewi Maniapoto, after a chiefly argument on where best to site a showdown battle with British troops, had withdrawn his 400 men to the western bank of the Waikato. They took no part in the fighting. Also, dangerously for the British, Maori reinforcement fighters led by Wiremu Tamihana reached the battleground to the east just as the white flag was broken out.

Though the King Movement and Waikato resistance continued, the brown royals fled from the capital at Ngaruawahia, finally into the King Country. Government confiscations of Waikato's fertile riverlands totalled 1.2 million acres and smashed the tribes' developing economic power. The Tainui tribes were virtually reservation Indians for decades and got back their sacred mountain, Taupiri, only in 1975. Even with the vaunted Tainui Settlement in 1995, less than 3% of the land came back - that and \$172 million.

Gaitely had books on Rangiriri, some of them rare, like Maurice Lennard's *The Road to War - The Great South Road 1862-64*, and I sat down to read them. Such sources are sometimes unreliable - Lennard's book, for example, attributes the disdainful quote on Rangiriri fortifications to Cameron, not the aide - but they are better than the general histories for the small detail that breathes life into a past era.

In these books, Maori melt down lead-head nails ordered for their flax and grain mills to make bullets. The sulphur for some of their gunpowder is brought up from Rotorua. A British soldier not only climbs the scaling ladder, but scrambles then onto a fellow trooper's shoulders to reach the top of the Rangiriri parapet. Some of the charging British officers wave Colt .45s - the six-shooters of the American west.

Personally, I like such small detail and facts. History needs detail, needs even, perhaps, the 1990s detail of an ex-Indian Army second lieutenant metal-sweeping the old battleground. Get enough detail, put it into sequence, and only then do the answers to the larger questions - why? and what did Rangiriri mean

to the nation? - surface slowly, and of their own accord.

I had detail - thank you Pat Gaitely - but as a walker I had the topography too. I'd tramped the very country on which this history was enacted. From the Hunuas I'd come down the Maori Rubicon - the Mangatawhiri Stream. At Mercer, one of the gun turrets of the *Pioneer* still existed. Walking up from Meremere, I'd stopped and camped, I suspected in retrospect, close to the high ground where Cameron made camp after by-passing Meremere. Then at Rangiriri I'd had time just to wander and browse, to let it all sink in.

Okay - so what large answers surfaced? No large answers at all, simply a feeling. Rangiriri felt introverted, like a nail driven in, punched down, puttied over, but without the satisfaction of the driven nail. The nameless graves, the mass Maori burial in a nearby church, the lack of any celebration from either side, and the ceaseless whipping by of the traffic, it nagged you. It was civil war, this battle - and it was less clear than the American Civil War that the losers' cause was wrong. But it was done. Bitterness was in the soil around here, and time and roading engineers had been encouraged in their obliterations.

### E Pari Ra

Like to the tide  
Moaning in grief by the shore  
Mourn I for friends captured  
And warriors slain  
Here let me weep for those  
Those I may see never more  
You whom I love  
O return to me

Whether you could take that past, transcend it with display, in order that the country become more aware, in order that its people might go forward into - forgive me, but this is genetic, - *a more Peace-Loving and Explorative Republic* - remained to be seen.

The weather was blowing up from the east, and the river as I approached it now carried a shadow of gunboats. But it was time now to quit Rangiriri. I set off walking across the river bridge to the Waikato's far side.

## #27 On to Hamilton

*Farmers host Te Araroa, the river speaks, and the Mayor of Hamilton takes a spin in her Morgan*

I climbed down from the bridge and was stopped by a seven-wire fence. The third wire down was electric, held proud of the fence-posts by insulation, and the fence was without gates.

The worst that can happen with an electric fence is that your leg gets jammed, slipping down through the wires. Unable then to escape, you stand there jerking with 4000-volt pulses like some soldier caught in machine gun fire. When I'd talked by phone to farmer Tony Fothergill, he'd told me the fence was difficult, and tipped me off on how to cross it.

A solitary willow grew there, and I used it to lever myself over the fence and drop down. I was back on the stopbanks, but the river had disappeared.

Down by the water was no solitary tree, but a slum corridor of willow by the thousand, slime-hung, root-matted, rotten and fecund all at once. The trees crawled one over another as they broke upwards from the bog, then spread their dense wickerwork of branches. The Waikato was somewhere in behind that.

In the 1800s the buttressed trunks of the kahikatea forests, New Zealand's lowland swamp tree, colonnaded the Waikato riverbanks.

After the confiscations of the 1860s war, the logging began, also the flax industry. Steam haulers with glowing fireboxes crawled along the river banks on rails laid upon imported willow sleepers. The kahikatea fell to the saws, the flax to the reaphooks, the traction engines bore it all away, and sparks flew. Fires burned out what was left. The Waikato River banks were bare, black, abandoned. The imported sleepers sprouted.

Lines of this regular sleeper willow took root, but the new farmers were planting it too. Grey willow, crack willow, it was fast-growing and the banks were eroding. The willow had no competition. It produced its little silky catkins, the river bore the seed downstream, and the Waikato River banks became, for the new coloniser, not so much a niche as a highway of expansion.

I could see the willow, I just couldn't see the river, but I was happy enough. I had a through-route down this stopbank all the way to Huntly. Ten farmers grazed this western bank of the Waikato: the Fothergills, the Becketts, the McBrides, the Andersons, the Kers, the Camerons who had a grazing licence on the stopbanks like the others but also 10-acres of freehold stretching right to the river, the Hills, the Laings, the Becketts, the Welchs. I'd contacted all the farmers and it was a go. It was a green. Hell, it was an orange. The markers that signal walkway routes on rural land are usually orange, and now, as I picked my way over the electrics, and through the cows, I could occasionally see, sticking up 15 kilometres away, the big orange markers that would lead me through. I was on a mission from God, and these were the kind of guidance markers He had plonked on the land. Only the pedestrian among you would call them the chimney tops of the Huntly thermal power station.

Rain clouds were piling up as I came up to the pigsty. A big porker - Napoleon? - rested its front trotters on the concrete surround to watch me close the gate on the boundary of Kariri Farms. *Whack, whack, whack*. It wasn't Napoleon making that din. A second figure unfolded itself above the pen surround holding a cold chisel and a hammer. This was the first farm I'd struck where the landholder actually watched me arrive on his land. He just stared - from a distance it seemed like a bad look - and I diverted across.

"Hi ! " I said brightly. "Geoff Chapple."



**Peter Anderson**

"Peter Anderson." He held out a calloused mitt, the handshake was strong, and he stood there waiting. I was on his land. It was my call.

"I don't know whether I've talked to you on the phone, Peter. About a week ago, I rang all the farmers on this strip. I'm walking through off-road from Cape Reinga."

"I was waiting to see if you'd turn back once you saw me. But I do remember that. You spoke to my wife, Peggy."

"That's right," I began to spiel. "We're testing the route for a national foot trail, and we're pretty determined the Waikato -" I cast my hand towards the blanketing screen of willow - "should be part of it."

Anderson visibly warmed. "That's a very good idea," he said. "I'm right into blimmin tourism. Anything to do with tourism is magic."

If you could wheel this guy up to the Cabinet Sub-Committee-To-Decide-If-Te-Araroa's-Crazy-Plan-Has-Any-Shred-Of-Substance, he'd have been your star witness. His enthusiasm threatened to overtake my own.

"Never mind Queenstown," said Anderson, gesturing out to the land - "get them out here to see all the nitty gritty bits."

The man was a born spruker, and I found myself backtracking to suggest difficulties.

"The bulls might be a worry." I said, explaining I'd just been past the first bull that had scared me. He'd seen me coming. His legs had stiffened, his back had arched slightly. I'd diverted to the fence-line and wondered at my chances, pack-laden, of throwing myself over the wire.

"Was he black and white?" asked Anderson.

"Uh huh."

"Okay. The black and white ones you don't worry about. They've all been bucket fed. They're hand-reared. They're used to people. They won't charge you."

Anderson talked. Farmers, after that first taciturn silence, like to talk. This is something Te Araroa has taught me. Farmers milk the cows, they spread the lime, they have trampled out the vintage, so to speak, for years, and they're wise about the land and its animals. But there is no communal centre to New Zealand's quasi-industrial farms, nowhere to share, and out here, where the magpies eternally quardle-oodle-ardle-wardle-doodle in the willow, where the cows low, and the silences extend, you could get both isolated and bored.

Rain began to spatter down.

"Where are you staying tonight?"

I shrugged, and Anderson invited me back to the farmhouse. "You can meet my wife," he said, and something in his voice told me he was proud of her.

Peg was boiling up a pot of barley for the pigs. Peter had been enlarging a drainage hole in the old pen when I arrived, but they were Peg's pigs, 10 sows and 44 piglets, and they were well-fed, clean pigs. Peg reckoned she might turn a profit from them - but only just- and I had the feeling they were close to pets.

The Andersons had bought the adjoining dairy farm a few years back. The interest rates went up, and the new farm took longer than expected to bring into production. At the very time the Andersons had hoped to settle back in style, they'd found themselves fighting a big debt.

"Forget the pigs," said Peg. " If it hadn't been for the farm-stays, we'd have been in trouble."

If there were financial fish-hooks in farming, if isolation set in, and boredom, the Andersons had solved it all by inviting the world to stay. They'd done that for the last 12 years, and the lamp above the table was hung with Japanese good luck charms. Their visitors put a coin into a lucky jar, and it was crammed with world currencies. There was even a paper Singapore dollar note. The unheralded Singaporean who'd signed it as a souvenir of his visit indicated, as he waved the ink dry, that his signature was identical to the official Singapore Minister of Finance's signature on the note. He was on a retirement holiday and said little, aside from the memorable phrase at dinner: "I know what's wrong with your country, and I know how to fix it." Neither Peter nor Peg remembered what came after that.

There were photos. There was the visitor's book:

*"I had a wonderful experiences, milking, ridding horse."*

*"I love Peter and Peg  
I love New Zealand  
I love ice cream."*

As we talked, Peg switched smoothly from fixing the pigs' fodder to fixing Peter and me. It arrived, this vast farm meal, beautifully presented on a dumb-waiter, and we dished ourselves homekill steak from a bowl of gravy, mashed potato, carrots, peas, bread, butter, then fell upon the fruit and ice-cream that followed.

When I awoke next morning, Peter was already gone to Auckland to get a new stub axle for the tractor, and as I was leaving, Peg showed me the 1000 cranes that hung in the sitting room, an attractor of luck, peace, all the good things. The tiny red origami cranes, threaded in five tightly packed strands, had arrived by post from a befriended Japanese teacher and her class on the same day Peter had gone to hospital for a bypass operation. Peter was still in his room, pre-op, when Peggy burst in and hung there the ultimate talisman. A good recovery followed. Tourism, as they say, is magic, and Peg farewelled me with her own transmissions, arms outstretched, hands vibrating haka-style: "This trail will happen," she intoned like Dr Mesmer as I backed away down the drive. "This trail will happen. Keep focused. Keep hold of it."



**Huntly Power Station**



**Waikato River from Hakarimata**

I neared the Huntly power station and followed the slurry pipes in. I walked through the Maori state-house suburb of Huntly West, and called in on the offices of the Maori Queen, Dame Te Atairangikaahu, in Parry Street. The Queen was out of the country - in Hawaii - but I left with her secretary a bound copy of Te Araroa's 44-page blueprint for the trail.

I met with the Tainui research team that was preparing a claim for the Waikato River. It's not generally known, but the Tainui Settlement of 1995 dealt only with recompense for confiscated land. The river claim was separated out, and has still to be put forward and resolved.

*Wai(water) kato(flowing)*: to Tainui Maori the river also has wairua - the second water of the spirit - and Tainui kaumatua ritually send their people down to the river if their spirits fall, if they are ill or about to embark on a journey. How, I asked, would the claim, for the river - the river in its entirety, its bed, its banks and swamps and tributaries - resolve? No-one knew. A settlement with a dollar value? - unlikely. Some kind of guardianship? - more likely.

Next day I walked out along River Road to the walkway up the Hakarimata Range and reached the highest point of my river journey. I could hear the thin whistle of Highway One far below, and see the Waikato stretching into a hazy distance. The sublime river: I thought of a conversation I'd had years back, with a lawyer friend who'd been involved in the Treaty claims process. We'd discussed those physical features of a land that people intuitively recognise are outside the property markets: the mountains, the rivers, the lakes.

The claims process, the legal eagle said, had brought the nation face to face with a big problem. New Zealand might need to evolve law that would satisfy both Maori claims to the taonga, and the Pakeha's own sense of their spirituality, these pieces of the sublime, and their common ownership.

"What if the river, the mountain, the lake had a voice?" my legal friend had said. "What if each had a fund set aside to enable them to speak? Then we would do away with the self-interest of any one group. The river, the mountain, the lake, whatever, would employ a QC to speak purely of its own best interest."

It was a nice idea. I sat on the Hakarimata tops, and heard at least one of the Waikato's requests - *Get*



*the willow off my banks."*

I descended on a steep root-bound track five hours later into Ngaruawahia, and booked a motel. I phoned ahead to Hamilton.

"Margaret? Geoff Chapple. You remember Te Araroa?"

"Ah. I've got good news for you. Angus Macdonald, John Hewitt and I are combining on this. The three mayors and their chief executives are now meeting regularly on the projects that cross our territorial boundaries. Heritage - we're building up a joint database - heritage buildings, heritage land, the kahikatea stands and so on. And the second major joint project is the walkway. The walkway - okay? We should talk about it."

Margaret Evans, Mayor of Hamilton, was a dynamo. She'd taken Te Araroa under her wing and now she offered to feed me too. As I hung up, I had an invitation to a dinner party the next night. Her mother Daphne Gibson was staying with her over Easter, and she'd invited also a couple of friends.

I river-walked part of the banks in front of Turangawaewae Marae, then the adjoining land where I asked permission from the high-born Mata Apiata, then the frontage of a chicken farm. But beyond that, the fences were built to keep you out. I diverted back to River Road. I wasn't too concerned about this section of the trail. I'd talked to the Waikato District Council about it. They were confident that with subdivision the land would yield a continuous Reserve strip within 5-8 years, bringing public access downriver from Ngaruawahia through to Hamilton City.



I walked River Road. The council was right about subdivision. *"Very special lifestyle opportunities"* were on offer at River's Edge Estate, or Pennell Developments, and where river-frontage land hadn't been grabbed in whole farm-sized lots by developers, individual homesteaders filled in the gaps with what you'd have to call mansions.

I reached Hamilton. I have had a jaundiced, crim's-eye view of the city. I was once in holding cells at the Hamilton Central Police Station. I was once convicted of disorderly behaviour in the Hamilton District Court. These things were political - fallout from the big anti-apartheid protest of 1981 - but they have been personal too. Even ten years after the protest, I'd had a Hamilton man take me by the throat when he found out I'd helped stop, with other on-field protesters, the Springbok v Waikato game of July 22, 1981. The approach to the city through industrial estates strung out along Highway One does not endear a visitor to the city either, and I've always found it - well - flat.

But Hamilton, as I approached down the river through the northernmost suburb of Flagstaff was eye-catchingly lovely. I crossed the bridge at Flagstaff, and the city's cobbled river walkway that began there had a Platonic perfection. The householders had adopted that American habit of running their lawns or gardens seamlessly onto the public domain. The sections here were without fences to delineate where private land ended and walkway land began - the flower gardens, low rock walls, and manicured lawns were as open to the gaze of the promenading citizen as they were to the people who owned them. On the

river side of the walkway grassy banks ran on down to the water. I talked to a householder out gardening beside the path, and she pointed to the river bank she'd personally cleared, even down to removing the willow.

"We've done our bit, and a lot of other people have done the same."



At its riverside the city had - citizenship. The pathway wasn't yet continuous though, and I walked across the golf course before picking up the path again and hearing a commotion coming upriver. The Waipa Delta churned past. Evening was falling as I made it to the centre of town. It was time for my dinner party.

### **The Waipa Delta paddlesteamer**

Daphne entertained me when I arrived. She'd been a yoga teacher. She showed me the right way to breathe - spine straight, and through the nose.

"Never the mouth. All that cold air when right here -" she pointed noseward "- the Good Lord gave you filters."

Then, as she served crackers and cheese, and the little corgi Zac panted away alongside me to scab a bit of the food, Daphne leaned across.

"They're a lovely dog. Do you know why the Queen has corgis?"

"I don't Daphne."

"Because they don't have that doggy smell."



### **Mayor Margaret Evans**

Margaret Evans arrived back from the supermarket. The guests swept in. We drank wine. We talked our heads off. When the Mayor served the pasta and sauces, the salmon and chicken side-dishes we all acquiesced to Daphne's request, joining hands while she said grace.

I spent the night in a spare bed in the garage, and in the morning, talked turkey.

Margaret Evans was pushing not just for river walkways right through her city and on to Mystery Creek, but longer-term for a Waikato trail from the mountains of the Central Plateau to the sea.

Eighteen months before, she'd arranged for Te Araroa to give a presentation to the Waipa and Waikato District Councils, to the Hamilton City Council, to Tainui representatives, and the region's environmental NGOs. Subsequently, the three local bodies had commissioned a report by Peter Greenwood to look at a river trail from Huntly, through Hamilton, to Cambridge.

We'd taken the Greenwood study into account in our own plan for a national trail but started it lower down, in Franklin District Council territory, at Meremere. Also, partly because of Greenwood's conclusion that riparian rights south of Hamilton would make the river through to Cambridge hard, we'd left the river after reaching Hamilton, and gone west to Pirongia Forest Park.

Still, the Mayor's vision and our own were much the same, and she'd got behind Te Araroa. I mentioned my hope that the regional council, Environment Waikato, would open its stopbanks to public access, and Margaret Evans fixed me with a steely gaze.

"Environment Waikato's draft strategic plan for the next ten years is now open for comment," she said. "It is important that you present a submission and encourage Environment Waikato to make the river track a major millennium project. I will get you a copy of the draft strategic plan. You will need to read it. You don't have much time. Submissions close on April 24. Make the submission. Specify that you would like to present it personally also. Hamilton City will support you."

"Okay Margaret." *And you! You out there! You thought walking from Cape Reinga to Wellington was simple?*



But enough of business. It was Easter, the mayor jammed a cap on her head, and dusted off her 1979 Morgan. Daphne shoehorned herself into the front seat, I took the back seat and we throttled out to the highway.

Our destination, if one was needed in a white sports car with the hood down and the wind whistling a song of pure freedom, was the Hamilton Gardens.

Hamilton Gardens has within it autonomous gardens of differing national styles. We walked through the Chinese garden with its pagoda, its special lake stones from Wuxi, its moon gates, its lotus lily pond, its grove of enlightenment.

We walked on beside the Zen garden with its raked white sand and standing stones, then through a pavilion to the Japanese water garden where the young pine were learning - with guidance from cords - to spread their branches at right angles to the trunk in ascending cloud-like strata. We walked on around the reflective pool of the Egyptian Garden, through the roses of the Old English Garden . . .

Then we were at the mayor's car again, and Daphne shoehorned herself back in. By then the car had attracted, as Morgans do, its Morgan expert, and a ritual exchange began.

"Old Morgan eh?" said the young man.

"Yep," said the mayor.

"Wooden chassis?"

"Wooden chassis."

"Tighten up the nuts every 3000 miles."

"That's right. Tighten the nuts."

"And here -" the young man leaned over the bonnet and ran his thumb along the bonnet edge - "gaps you can put your finger into."

"That's it."

"The joy of hand-made cars eh?"

"Nine per week," said Margaret Evans. "Last time I visited England I went to the Morgan factory north-east of London. That's the weekly production rate there - nine. They all have modern engines. It's only the outside that looks old."

"Like me," said Daphne.

## #28 Hamilton - Te Rauamo: Pirongia

*Te Araroa climbs a mountain*

The weather was clear, and the Waikato Plains lay Disneyland green far below me, stretching east until they shadowed into the distance and ended somewhere near the Kaimai Range. South-east you could see the same plain begin to crumple and fold into the King Country, and as you swung your gaze even further south - hey! Big mountain ahead.

I'd walked out from Hamilton by road until I'd got to the Kapamahunga Range, then had followed the Karamu Walkway southward across high rocky farmland. It was a good walk, aircraft level above the plains, and it was Autumn tugging season. Rams in rattle harnesses edged up to the ewes, biting their ears, and leaving behind on the ewes' rumps the red or green stripes of successful congress.

But Pirongia was the big one. It dominated the horizon in front with that smooth symmetry that volcanoes have - except that its entire summit had been ripped off long ago by monstrous explosions.



I knew little about Pirongia. I knew it was high. Not super-high, but high enough to have winter snowfall. It was a sombre mountain, heavily bushed, and its rocky skeleton poked up in cones and ravines. It was not the kind of place where you'd want to stray off the trails.

Straight on from the ending of the Karamu walkway, I entered Pirongia's foothills at Blue Bull Stream. It was mid-afternoon and a pleasant walk in, but as I turned onto the Tahunui Track to the summit, the bush closed in, and the light faded.

It was only 3.30 pm. I felt a prickle of cold moisture on my cheek, and realised I'd entered the cloud level. It wasn't raining - was it? I could feel myself getting wet. I looked down at my camera bag, the one thing I protect from moisture, and it was definitely damp. I put on my anorak, tucked the camera case inside that, and kept climbing. Above me the bush canopy began to leak. Big heavy drops. The bush around me was wet. My anorak was soon slick with water. The track was pooled with water and rivulets threaded from foothold to foothold down the steeper bits. My boots were sodden. The mountain bore all the signs of a heavy downpour, but I hadn't seen anything you could call actual rain.

An apex is supposed to shed fluids, isn't it? I had the idea that the higher I climbed the drier it was going to get. Not on Pirongia. The higher I climbed, the more water seeped from its peaty flanks, and the more the track mired me in its bogs. The mountain was oozing water. There was as much suggestive energy in this ooze as there is in the oil seepage of Texas. You got the feeling if you plunged a Leki in here you'd get a geyser. Then, in a brief return to reason, the tramp climaxed suddenly with one bald dryish bit, the summit. I clung to the trig there the way Noah might have clung to his ark.

It was 6 pm. I was at the top. The greatest vantage point in the Waikato. One kilometre up. Hell, I could see nothing - nothing. It was a 360 degree whiteout. Night fell. Within ten minutes, it was a 360 degree

blackout, and I found my way onward by flashlight, thanking Waikato DOC - yes, from my heart - for the boardwalks that, for short sections at least on these summit ridges, elevated you above the ooze. Thirty minutes later I crashed into the Pahautea Hut. I lit the hut candle, fixed myself a freeze-dried stew, I ate, I leafed through the hut book.

One word permeated the book - mud.

Some of my antecedent trampers were sufficiently gob-struck by it they simply repeated the same word, over and over, like accident victims.

"Mud, mud, mud." wrote one.

I checked the dates. Most of these people had come up in summer, but it was mud or some variant of it that caught their attention.

"Doesn't the sun ever come out on this f----- hill?" wrote one summer visitor.

There was a stern little note from a DOC man, pointing out the gratitude people owed to those volunteers who'd constructed boardwalks across this swamp.

But if the boardwalk elevated people, and made them happy, so too did the trampers' sense of humour. Bill Clinton, Michael Jackson, even Elvis Presley had all struggled through this mud to the summit, and as to Dave of the UK, it changed his life: "I found this journey bordered on the sick," he wrote, "and has forced me to return to England to become a priest."

And the mountain served notice, in these tramper comments, that it was no pushover. One group, slowed by the puggy terrain, had miscalculated its time to the summit, and on to the hut. They wrote of the fear they'd had of spending the night under muddy trees, and the relief, coming in by candlelight, at reaching the hut.

Another adventure group, struggling to the top en masse, noted: "Adviser collapsed - search party three hours late."

Another word recurred - rats - but it didn't stick in my mind as part of Pirongia's charms until I awoke at 1 am.

From every corner of the hut came the dry scratching sound of rodents at work. I shouted, and an intense scurrying began, receding only gradually into silence, as if the frantic escape of the rats took place down long tunnels that led away from the hut.

I awoke again later as the rain began to pelt down, and the wind blew. A volcano is never finally extinct, it only sleeps. I had a vision of Pirongia starting to awaken, sloughing off its superficial garments. The bush, the peat, sliding away. Then the brittle epidermis of rock, crumbling like so much safety glass, to reveal, standing for a moment of surprise, in perfect shape, the quintessential Pirongia - a great pyramid of water.

Next morning it was raining solidly, clouds were whipping past the cabin, and I waited. I set off finally down the Tiwarawara route, my boots sliding sideways off the very tree-rounds that had been put there to keep the boots dry, and the bog, as you skidded into it, knee deep.





Pirongia squelched more of my hopes a little later. I'd intended branching off the Tiwarawara Route down the western side of the mountain, following the old Hihikiwi Track. DOC had closed this western track seven years before but I figured that I could get through that way, and I wanted to do it because the Hihikiwi Track allowed a Te Araroa through-tramper to exit the mountain close to the next traverse, which was along the perimeter of the Royal New Zealand Forest and Bird Society's Walter Scott reserve and across private farms to SH 31.

I found the entrance to the old trail. It was marked closed, but I took a compass bearing and followed it in. Easy - the markers were still nailed onto the trees, overgrown with moss, but visible. I made about 400 metres.

Seven year-old saplings covered the old track in a dense re-growth. On a dry day, that would have been fine. On a wet day, the saplings stood there like a crowd of giggling kids, each one glittering with water droplets.

As I pushed through them, each one showered me with around half a cup of water.

I had the anorak. I had a storm-cover for the pack. I had a camera in a stuffbag inside its shoulder case - a double-layer of protection - but I realised what I was in for. This regrowth would probably persist over most of the track. Three kilometres of happy water-tossing seven year olds was going to be equivalent, in the sort of soaking it would deliver, to wading a river shoulder-deep. And then the sun, which had shone for an hour or so, went out. Pirongia had reached up and brought down a few more threatening storm clouds. I quit the trail, and went back to the Tiwarawara route. The decision disappointed me but I seen enough to report to Te Araroa Trust that the old Hihikiwi Track - given a weeks work by a gang with slashers - would be easily brought back into service.

I hit Te Tahi Road as darkness began to fall. A big rainstorm was piling up and I spotted a lighted house on a hill with a lighted shed below. It was too good to pass by.

The shed was a motorcycle mechanic's workshop, with a radio tuned to a local commercial station and the lights on, but no-one there. I went up to the house. I was wet and muddy and I suggested I stay in the shed. The owner, Gordon Brierly, agreed. He brought down a thermos of boiling water, a plate of noodles, some instant coffee, tea bags, a container of sugar and a little jar of milk, and bade me goodnight.

I looked around. As a big rain began to snick the corrugated iron roof, as I mixed myself a cup of hot sweet coffee, as I unrolled my sleeping bag onto a dry carpeted corner next to the weight-training equipment and lay down, I knew this was the Ritz. The radio gabbled on, and came up to its 8 pm horoscope feature. A woman's voice began to unroll the romantic encounters, the financial windfalls, the opportunities for travel, the whole standard bagful of lucky breaks that awaited the Tauruses, the Geminis, the Virgos out there in the darkness. She was coming up to Pisces, my own star-sign, and I waited patiently.

I looked around at a ceiling lined with tarpaper and chicken wire. At rafters hung with motorbike exhaust systems. At a floor stacked with drums of Motul motor oil. At shelves crammed with fluted alloy engine

casings. I looked at the rat who'd come out to lick his whiskers on top of an engine casing.

"Pisces," husked the woman portentously. "A walk on the wild side will bring a new dimension into your life."

The failure at Hihikiwi meant an extra ten kilometres of roadwalking to get back to Walter Scott Reserve, and I set off next morning early. From the start it was entertaining.

Two farmers shot out of a side-paddock on a quad and stopped. They were both called Willy, Willy Laverty driving the quad and Willy Payne with the tiger tat. The two Willies were on their way to fix up a farm truck.

Two Willies, okay, fair game. I broke out the digital, snapped them, and played the picture back on the replay function.

"What the fuck is the world coming to?" said Laverty.

"Yeah well it's real technology Willy," said Payne. "It's no longer the little Box Brownie Willy."



A monogrammed ute shot past on the highway.

"What do you think of those guys?" asked Laverty

"Environment Waikato," said Payne to me by way of explanation.

"They're laying 1080," said Laverty. "They're doing the Waipa. They laid baits along this river here - the Mangati."

"He lost two dogs," said Willy Payne, rolling himself a smoke.

"To be fair, they did come around and warn us," said Willy Laverty. "They tell you all the things to look out for. Everyone was told, and we put muzzles on the dogs. But the dangerous thing is the possum carcasses. They take a month before they disappear and my father let the dogs off last Saturday. He was just watching them, and he got distracted.

"Next morning one was lying dead in the box. The other had smashed his way out of the box and made 50 metres before he dropped."

"That's what the guy said, Willy," said Payne. "They go loopy. They'll crash their heads into the tractor buckets."

"They weren't \$1000 dogs, but they were useful dogs," said Laverty. "Ben was a bloody good dog."

"Farming these days - it's one thing after another," said Payne.

"I milked 240 cows last year. If I milk 300 this year, I'll just be standing still," said Laverty.

"The overheads are too high, because the bigwigs are too busy driving their BMWs," said Payne, giving his rollie a good hard smoking. "There's going to be a march on Anchor House soon - maybe the Dairy Board as well. Maybe its time to hook yourself a new deal. Start to trade. A kilo of milk for a bag of onions."

"That's very communistic of you Willy," said Laverty.

"Yeah, well, you just look at what we're getting into. Christmas time. The kids aren't looking at what they get - it's no longer the thought that counts but how much the present cost. It's a sad society Willy."

They talked on. That bend in the road upfront - the stock trucks took advantage of the small layby there to empty their effluent tanks. The bend in the road behind - it had a dangerous camber. On Christmas Eve two years back a Honda had clipped the top of the fence, skidded across the field, and overturned into the Mangati. Three young people, a girl and two brothers, had died. The families had put up their sad crosses, but cars were still leaving the road at exactly the same spot, ten a year, ploughing through Laverty's fence, crosses and all.



I went on. I talked to Ron Steel, who was setting up pictures of stags and pigs in a field. The pictures were targets for a local bow-hunting group. The bow hunters competed to estimate distances accurately, and they scored according to whether their shafts entered a kill zone, or merely wounded the pictured beast. At 74, Steel, a former saw-miller, claimed to be the oldest bow-hunter in the country. He'd been a hunter in the past, but the modern rifle made the contest too one-sided. The bow required good stalking skills, and gave the animal more of a chance.

He'd killed just once since giving up the rifle years before, his bladed arrow bringing down a wild pig in the Arahina bush outside Otorohanga.

I came up to Walter Scott Reserve. Colin Campbell owned the farm at the back of the reserve, and I carried his wax-paper wrapped *Waikato Times* a kilometre in from the highway. That was the least I could do.

Campbell turned out to be a piercingly blue-eyed, no-nonsense farmer and he gave me permission to walk his farm. As to a national trail - he was agreeable to that too, provided through-trampers checked with him. I walked the land across to SH 31, then down the quiet Kaimango side-road that leads directly south off highway 31, toward Waitomo.

I had a circle marked on my map alongside Kaimango Road, and the name Guy Pilkington.

When designing the trail months before, I'd left the section between SH 31 and Waitomo vague. I knew there were five DOC reserves in that 25 kilometres of traverse, and I'd figured you could link them up. I'd rung the Waitomo horse trekker Allen Juno, and he'd confirmed that horse treks came through from

Waitomo to SH 31. Fair enough. Where horses go, hikers can go too. I'd told him then that I'd ring him closer to the actual trail test to discuss the route.

That time was now. But first, I was seeking Pilkington. Horse trekkers could overnight at his woolshed, so I'd heard, and I aimed to do the same.

The sun set over Kawhia Harbour as I walked Kaimango Road. The great harbour lay spread-eagled and silver 15 km to the west, and the intervening ridges had turned misty with evening, but I was otherwise engaged. I was keen to find the Pilkington spread before nightfall, and there was no sign yet of a farmhouse. A white Toyota Camry pulled up alongside me, and the driver rolled down the window. I leaned in.

"I can't take a ride, thanks. But you might be able to help. There's a Guy Pilkington on this road somewhere - do you know him?"

"I do," said Guy Pilkington.

## #29 Hamilton - Te Rauamo: Waitomo and Te Kuiti

*Te Araroa follows the hooves of horses, falls down a tomo, and enters the political maelstrom of Te Kuiti*

"Get in behind Sarge!"

It was 7.30 am and we stood in a wide valley. Giant mossy boulders lay tumbled in the valley floor, and a stream wound beside and under them, leaving overhangs, natural bridges, and ferny gullies. This was the valley where the Pilkington boys had come to play as children. It was the 1960s, the Cuba blockade, Kennedy, Kruschev, the H-bomb tests. Down here, crawling through with your sandwiches and bottle of drink, you knew that war had come to the world, and you were hiding out.

"Stand Sarge! Walk on Fly!"

With shouts, or by piercing whistle, Guy Pilkington guided his dogs. Eighteen hundred ewes began to pour down the flanks of the valley. The huntaways Sarge and Ru moved the main mobs quickly, barking and running boisterously at their heels. The little English Collie eye dog Fly, was gone from sight somewhere in the tops seeking less biddable sheep. She was a silent dog, a slinking dog, a thinker.

"Walk on Fly!" The huntaways were back, panting and lolling. Guy Pilkington kept calling to Fly, but you couldn't see her.

"We seem," said Pilkington, "to have lost Fly."

After the 1960s childhood, the 1970s. New Zealand had lost its traditional wool and meat market as Britain entered the EEC, but a new and aggressive Prime Minister, Robert Muldoon, arrived in 1975. Sheep had always set New Zealand right, you just had to keep stacking them up. Muldoon put in place the Land Development Encouragement loans: the interest rates were low, you could even get the things written off if you met certain production targets. New Zealand's steep marginal lands began to smoke with the burn-offs, they began to tinge green.

In the 1970s, Guy Pilkington was gang foreman on a North Sea oil rig - highly paid work - but back home his father had divided up the family farm. Guy's bit was a few hundred acres of good grass, and 1700 acres of steep country, cleared in the 1900s but reverted since to bush. He came back to New Zealand, got an LDE loan, and with Deb Pilkington set out to make a farm.

Throughout New Zealand, the LDE's brought in a lot of marginal land that then simply slumped into the valleys and washed out to sea. But some of it stuck - this 1700 acres above Kawhia stuck.

"We left a lot of the bigger trees," said Pilkington. "The puketeas, the mangeao."

"Those dead ones on the hill?"

"Yeah, mangeao - a lot of those have died - the possums give them rissoles."

In the late 70s and early 80s, inflation went to double figures. When Pilkington began bringing in the farm, he could clear it, fence it, and grass it for \$100 an acre. Within a few years that was \$400 an acre, and still rising. The debt went up, farming returns went down. At the beginning, if you inflation-adjusted the dollar to 1998 levels, wool brought in close to \$20 a kilo. It brought in \$2.60 a kilo now.

"Even so," said Pilkington, "this farm is a very good living - but not with the debt. Forty-six percent of the

gross income goes to debt servicing. The rest is on-farm costs plus our drawings."

"Your drawings?"

"Our income. It's \$15,000 a year, for a family of six. That's what we live on. There she is, up on the bluff. Walk on right Fly!"

Way up on the opposing ridge, a black and white pelt crouched, slid forward, and the last of the flock flowed downhill to join the main mob. Pilkington rolled a smoke, and his eyes crinkled, watching them come. His mind was gone from the debt.

"In mid-summer," said Pilkington, "you're out here earlier than this - 4 am. The moon is out, the sun comes over the hill and the moon disappears. There's a lot of drudgery in farming: keeping the country clean, the fences repaired - but when you're out on your horse with the dogs shuttling the stock around - that's the cream of farming."



We moved the mob onto the next hill, and came back up the valley. A tall kahikatea stood there at the junction of three streams. Pilkington had measured it by using a staple box and trigonometry. The method wasn't precise, but it came out around 47 metres, one of New Zealand's taller kahikateas. The tallest known was a 66.5 metre monster on Mt Pirongia.

We made our way back up to the farmhouse, a turn-of-the-century kauri villa that Pilkington had trucked in, turned sideways to the sublime outlook over Kawhia, then extended with a second storey and two big bays with a verandah between, facing west to the view. He'd done most of it himself and used rimu off the farm.

The house interior had polished floors of native timber, a modern kitchen, a long dining table standing on a thick Chinese carpet, a patio out the back. It aspired to be a tasteful upper middle class dwelling that a mud farmer could fall into at the end of the day and know he'd succeeded. Room by room it was coming up to that standard, but it wasn't finished.

The Pilkington family felt solid. The affection of husband and wife was still palpable, the kids happy. But the family was under stress too. \$15,000 a year. Add on the farming perks of course: cheap meat and a 60% tax writeoff on the Camry's running costs, but you could sense the underlying worry that, just maybe, and after 20 years of hard work, they'd have to sell up.

It was time to go but I was still unsure of my exact route. I'd tried to reach the Waitomo horse trekker Allen Juno a couple of times, but didn't connect. He was out hunting. He was out trekking - no matter. Guy Pilkington knew the trail, roughly. An unformed paper road would take me through to Ike Johnston's farm, halfway between Pilkington's and Waitomo. I'd rung Johnston that morning, and had a brief, gruff, 7 am chat.

"When you get to the wool-shed," Johnston had said, "carry on until you come to a quarry. Go up the hill



there and you'll see the airstrip. Ngauruhoe and Ruapehu will be right in front. Take a line off the mountains, and stay right of a big patch of bush. That'll get you through to Waitomo.

Ngauruhoe? Ruapehu? They seemed a million miles away, and I clung instead to Pilkington's instruction as I left. Go to the end of Kaimango Road, find a steel gate there. That was the trekkers' route, and Pilkington's last words to me were: "Follow the horses' hooves."

I found the gate. I found hoofprints. An old bulldozed track led away south. To the west, I saw a whitened escarpment, and it pleased me. It looked as if the scarified rock had been jacked up right through the earth. Tomo country. I was entering the limestone belt.



I passed through farmland and went on through big blocks of reverting land. I stampeded a dozen feral goats. Once, I missed the trail, but backtracked, examining the clay as intently as any aboriginal tracker. Horses' hooves, they went this way.

The hoofed track led into deep bush and came out at last through a rock cutting, up farm races, and past a woolshed where piglets fled away, and a peacock preened.

The woolshed! I looked around for a quarry, for a snowy mountain. Nothing. A corrugated iron house stood on a hill. Ike Johnston's house? I went up and knocked. No-one home. I looked in the window. On the mantelpiece stood one of those walnut wood clocks shaped like Rangitoto with convex glass over the round face and golden hour and minute hands. The rest of the furniture had the dark varnish and rounded wooden edges of 1930s chic. The place was frozen in time.

I slugged on for another kilometre, confused, then a quad pattered up from behind and a sandy-headed farmer grinned at me, gap-toothed.

"Ike's been looking out for you. His house is on the ridge there, and there's a shortcut straight up that hill. Go on up. He might just give you a taste of his home brew."

I climbed to the ridge, up steps past a neat garden, and knocked. I looked around. The world lay at my feet.

Ike came to the door, barefoot, baggy pants.

"I've been watching for you to come over the ridge down there, and I'd just given you up."

"Wow!"

It was dusk, but you could see forever. Columns of smoke drifted up from faraway valleys, and I'd never before seen so many North Island mountains.

"Ngauruhoe, Ruapehu." Ike Johnston lowered a stubby finger on each one. " Mt Pureora over there. The Rangitoto Range. The Kaimais out the back there. The Coromandel Range. Kakepuku. Pirongia. And over here the Sugarloaf, and Lady's Rock - you can see the two tits on it.



Okay - would you like a beer?"

"A beer, I would love."

I had no idea about Ike Johnston, and as we talked and drank, I began a subtle probe.

"I know farmers spend too much time chasing sheep up and down hills to worry about recreational walking, but - "

"Nah. I tramp. Down in Stewart Island a couple of years back. We left Smoky. Bloody great packs. A couple of rifles went with us - there's white tail down there, Virginian deer, I like the white tail, they're smart - and we went four days on that northwestern trail right through to the pub. I'll get another flagon."

Ike Johnston turned out to be a rootin' tootin' trail juggernaut.

"Where you came up. I opened that up with the HD11 a few years ago - bulldozed through - never told DOC or anyone I was doing it. I put in the punga bridges. Years back it was going to be the road from Pirongia to New Plymouth, and they made that rock cutting you came through. If you went back there tonight, it'd be light as day - thousands of glow-worms."

The Johnston family had pioneered farming around Waitomo from the turn of the century. The Putaki tops was their place. They were guardians to its history, their history. The old Maori trail from Kawhia to Waitomo had come across this hilltop and Johnston was going to put a legal covenant on the trail route through his farm, to keep it open, forever. To trekkers, trampers, whoever. The old homestead I'd peered into was already used as a waystop for horse trekkers.

Later, Johnston suggested we take a look outside. We stepped out onto the verandah, beers in hand, and for a moment, everything was black. Then you could pick the mild glow that backlit Pirongia's inky eastern flank.

"That's Hamilton," said Johnston.

A second light source both wider and fainter phosphoresced behind the mountain's inky western flank.

"That," said Johnston, "is Auckland."



Next morning, Ike Johnston took me across the Putaki hills, and pointed the way down.

Three hours later, still slightly hungover, I approached the little township of Waitomo. Down a sideroad stood a green hut with the initials HTG on the side - the Hamilton Tomo Group.

A guy was sitting on the bonnet of a Triumph 2000 saloon, swinging his legs.

Hamish Balfour was an ex-lawyer, the son of the Reverend David Balfour formerly vicar of St Pauls Church in Symonds Street, Auckland. He was just hanging out, working for Blackwater Rafting when they needed an extra hand, staying in the HTG hut meantime.

I already knew something of the HTG.

In 1995 I'd choppered in to the South Island's Pearse Resurgence - the press at work.

Two cave divers, Kieran McKay and Dave Weaver had just set a New Zealand cavediving record in the resurgence, but only one had come back. They'd gone 85 metres down the shaft. The two cave divers had tied off the line at 85 metres. What happened next? No-one knew for sure. Disorienting narcosis is standard at this depth. And maybe too, as he put his arm up in the agreed signal to ascend, Dave Weaver lost critical bubbles of air through the wristbands of his drysuit, finned faster to compensate for the lack of buoyancy, sucked deeper at oxygen that is so condensed at this depth it sears the lungs. Whatever, he'd sunk, and folded up on a ledge 95 metres down. When McKay got to him, his mouthpiece was out, and he was dead.

I looked at the HTG hut's log and saw an entry out of 1994. *Rangitaawa Shaft - Yet another attempt on the sump. Kieran McKay/Dave Weaver.*

Sad. Cave diving is the most dangerous cave exploration work, but any exploration, wet or dry through the riddled world under Waitomo has a dangerous edge. I unrolled a map of the North Island's longest cave system, Gardners Gut. Caving is dangerous - and magical: the names spelled it out. Twinkling Quarry. The Well. The Chimney, The Regent. The Organ Grinder. Lambert Passage, named for Peter Lambert, killed in 1960 by a falling rock at Harwoods Hole.

The HTG had mapped Gardners Gut, and other caves, and in their passages, a rough tough camaraderie prevailed. "HTG's hairiest troll," boasted one male caver in the HTG log. "Psycho caver from Hell" claimed another with a manic sketch of some helmeted Moloch. "Tits out for the video" noted a female caver, and there was a flash photograph headed "The Full Monty". A male trio, can-can kicked on some underground

promontory, each one naked but for his helmet, light, and his huge gumboot codpiece.

Balfour fixed me a cup of tea. He was at a loose end, I was too.

"Would you like," said Balfour, "to take a look at Gardners Gut? I can pick a route that won't be too technical."

We slid down a punja trunk into the Zweihohlen entrance and stooped through a passage that gave onto a muddy ledge.

"There's a drop there," said Balfour, edging across. I swung my helmet light onto it. Two metres away down the greasy slope, the ledge ended in a wide dark crack. Water gurgled somewhere below it.

I followed him across. Balfour's white gumboots were already disappearing up a hole no more than shoulder width. I wriggled through, pushing the drybag with the camera in front of my nose. As I emerged, I knew I'd passed an initiation of some sort.

"You're in now," said Balfour. "There's a squeeze between you and the outside world."

We were in a collapse chamber that looked like a London cathedral during the blitz. The whole ceiling had come down and the pile of debris on the floor was metres deep. We passed quickly through.

Then the world turned glisteningly beautiful.

"Cave coral," Balfour pointed at the little florettes that edged the walls. "formed by water evaporation on the rock."

"Flowstone," he indicated. The stone, as white and apparently as viscous as wet icing sugar, looked to be oozing down the walls, but it was rock-hard.

We came up to our first big stalagmite - the Finger - then on to another, the biggest stalagmite in New Zealand, four times as high as a man, two arm-spans round, a giant gothic wax-pile of a thing and named to suit - the Birthday Candle.



I photographed the Finger, passably. My attempt to photograph the Birthday Candle failed. The Waitomo darkness simply defeated my camera. Despite weak illumination from the helmet lights, the LCD screen showed only darkness, and I framed badly, or got too close, the flash overexposing the white rock, or not close enough, so the cave's wonders faded into shadow. The flash was puny in these vast spaces. It was a very, very, black place.

Loss of light deep underground is a caving nightmare. Balfour suggested I should know why. We turned off the helmet lights.

"Wave your hand in front of your face," came the voice of my companion. "There's nothing there. This is what it's like to be blind."

We went on. The grand pillared and blocked architecture of the caverns stood all about - "Awksim" as someone had written in the hut log - but I found myself studying detail. The little straw stalactites that hung above us by the dozen were exactly named, calcite-rich water drops sliding down the interior tube and depositing their minute amounts of calcite in a ring at the bottom.



**Helictite**



**Shawl rock**

I saw the helictites, little protrusions that grow, against all expectation and, said my guide, without any satisfactory physical explanation, directly out from the wall. We reached the shawl rock that hung from the cave ceiling in folds, then turned back.

The cave had given me an odd feeling. I was happy.

"What is it," I said to Balfour, "that makes you feel joyous down here."

"Is it that the rock is living?"

"Maybe," I said. There was something more but I didn't know what it was.

We levered ourselves out of the cave, and night had fallen. No track led away from Zweihohlen, and we lost our way, finding the Waitomo River easily enough, but too far upstream.

We began to wade, two helmeted lamp-lit men in the river, but we stumbled and slipped on the greasy river rock, and I was first back onto the bush bank. It was easier to swing through the trees, and I was leading when I stepped on a shadow and disappeared.

I was lucky. The tomo was shallow, and I fell sideways and hit mud just a metre down. Another New Zealand experience. There are thousands of big bird bones found down tomos, and I knew now what boiled through the brain of a moa in the first split second of the drop. Sheer and utter surprise.

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Next day I set off for Te Kuiti, arriving around 4 pm.

Te Kuiti voters were filing in and out of polling booths. After months of campaigning on the King Country-Taranaki by-election, the reckoning was nigh. It was a true-blue farming seat and few doubted that the National Party would retain the seat, but the population was restless.

I went into the main street at 7 pm to sample the atmosphere. The Labour Party's electorate headquarters in Rora Street was the first stop. Michael Cullen was there, Lianne Dalziel and her partner Rob Davidson, also Andrew Beyer, the Auckland regional organiser. Everyone seemed to be chewing on pizzas or Chinese takeouts.

"Well gang, who's going to take it?"

There was a silence, then - "Talk to the man who runs the pie cart across the street," said Davidson. "The one with the ring in his nose. He says Labour is going to win."

I went across the road to the Alliance Headquarters. By then the first results were coming in.

"We won the booth!" Dave Macpherson was shouting into the mobile. "Centennial Park School. Did you get that Matt? Last time we got twenty votes at that booth. This time we got 56."

The King Country seat had been held previously by a three-term Prime Minister, Jim Bolger. Te Kuiti was his home town and the local National Party electorate people had grown happily used to being the eye of the media storm every election day.

This time the National Party candidate was from the Taranaki end of the electorate, and the media action had moved south, to Stratford, in Taranaki.

I went on down to the Te Kuiti Club where the National Party was gathered. People sipped G&Ts while TV One's Election Night Special beamed into the room.



"There's really two electorates in this by-election," TV1's Linda Clark was confiding to host Mark Hosking. "One here in Taranaki, the other centred at Te Kuiti."

"All 20 of us," muttered one of the party faithful.

Still the food was good, and there was a determined cheer when Maureen Wilkie took the mobile call that confirmed a win. The majority was way down, but it was a win. Act man Rodney Hide swept in later and laid a ham-like handshake on everyone within reach. He was the only man I saw who looked happy that night. His party had moved up from single digit support in the last General Election to take a massive 25% of the by-election vote. The heartland was hurting. I'd been to the very places where it was hurting. It had protested by moving to the political right.

## The North - Section 6: Te Kuiti - Wanganui

### #30 Mangaokewa Stream – Pureora

*Te Araroa fails to grab its photo opportunities and ponders the greater scale of things*

Emotional intelligence - I remember reading it in *Time* magazine about a year ago, and the basic thesis was that, no matter how high your smarts, if you didn't have emotional intelligence you might not make it far in the great game of life.

It's the building blocks of character we're talking about. Endurance, perseverance, long term goals.

As I recall, the *Time* story, before rounding up the usual quotient of highly qualified Emotional Intelligence experts with degrees from Harvard, started out with the normal reader-friendly examples. Two kids roughly equivalent in brain function sit in front of a table. Their mother places a marshmallow in front of each and tells them she's popping down to the shop to buy two more. The child who resists the temptation to eat his marshmallow, and can wait until mum arrives home, will get a second marshmallow. That child who can't resist the temptation won't get the second marshmallow.

The little girl waits - she gets two marshmallows. She has the right stuff, and will become a rocket scientist. The little boy doesn't. He gets one marshmallow. He will be a street sweeper.

That, anyway, was the gist of it, and I remember thinking at the time - if this was the test for emotional intelligence, then my EI quotient was zero. I tend to want it all, as Freddie Mercury used to say, and I want it now.

As I headed up the Mangaokewa River though, something happened that would pull out reserves of emotional intelligence I didn't even know I possessed.

I'd road-walked a few kilometres out of Te Kuiti to the Mangaokewa Reserve. The reserve is a little-known but quite enchanting little park in a limestone gorge. A swing-bridge crosses the Mangaokewa River here, a track extends a short distance up the river, and the bluffs that overhang the reserve have all the sepulchral leaching, the pitted overhangs and layering that makes limestone such an attractive rock.

But I wanted to follow the river upstream some 35 kilometres, far beyond the reserve boundary. When we'd planned Te Araroa, a Te Kuiti surveyor, Max Harris, had done a cadastral (property boundaries) search of the river for us, and came back with good news. It was possible to do that 35 kilometres on a continuous strip of public land, either DOC reserve or esplanade reserve.

The only catch was - no formal trail. I left the reserve in the late afternoon and found a rough track upriver, but it tailed out about four kilometres up, at the first big bluff. I camped under a big kahikatea, and in the morning climbed the bluff, finding a relatively east route up through the limestone cliff that edged

the top of the river valley.

I got to the top of the limestone, but was stopped there by gorse and blackberry. Dense thickets of thorns lay between the top of the cliff and the farmland beyond. I took off my pack and scouted along the clifftop, first one way - nope - then the other. Yes! Forty metres along the cliff, the blackberry thinned sufficiently to allow a passage through to the fields.

But that 40 metres was literally a cliff-hanger. You had to climb under branches that extended out over the drop. As I returned to pick up my pack I'd done the route twice, but I still had a twinge of anxiety about taking the pack through.

I was sufficiently worried that when I shouldered the pack, I deliberately didn't buckle it on. I had the notion that if I were to slip, I'd shed the pack and give myself a better chance of stopping my fall with the frail bits of vegetation that poked out from the limestone face.

As to the camera, I have always carried it ready for use in a small shoulder bag. It had always been made secure by clipping the bag's shoulder strap under the chest buckle of the pack.

I made the 40-metre traverse, dodging under branches, grabbing big handfuls of fibrous grass, concentrating hard. Halfway along I heard a thud and looked around. A rotten bit of trunk that had fallen? Aislodged stone maybe? I didn't know what, but it wasn't a worry. I went on, took off the pack once I was on safe ground, and wiped my brow.

Something was missing. For a moment I didn't know what it was, but it had accompanied me for some 700 kilometres of trekking, and even before I could identify what it was, the absence was profound

The camera. I couldn't believe it. It hadn't even occurred to me that without the chest buckle to keep it restrained, the thing could slip off my shoulder, slide down my arm and disappear. That was all it took, and I hadn't even felt it go. I remembered only that quiet, sickening thud.

I crawled back along the clifftop, fingers crossed that the thud was the sound of the camera bag dropping only a short distance, from my shoulder to the clifftop at my feet, and that I'd see the blue bag sitting there, held up on the edge of the drop, waiting for paternal hands to close upon it again, to admonish it, but to love it nonetheless. I wanted to feel that surge of gratitude that it was safe.

I went back over the route twice. No camera bag. No camera.

I knew now the thump was the sound of my Mavica FD7 saying goodbye, and I peered over the edge of the bluff. It was precipitous, but it wasn't sheer all the way down. Ledges stuck out here and there with bits of bush on them. The Mavica's bounding descent could have stopped short.

I found a way down, then picked my way back along one of the wider ledges until I was under the general region where the camera had fallen. I saw the blue bag, held up on a 45 degree slope just before the cliff sheered away again.

But it had fallen a long way. I will give you this as accurately as I can. The first drop was about six metres - that doesn't sound colossal, but, unless you're in an old villa with a 12-foot stud, its over twice the height of the room you're sitting in. At the bottom of that six-metre free-fall, the camera had hit a ledge, about two metres wide. The ledge was just rock. It had rebounded off the ledge and fallen a further two metres onto humus covered earth, coming to rest against a bit of spindly scrub.

I picked it up. The Mavica was encased in a blue nylon zippered bag. Aside from plastic beading that gave the square bag its shape, the bag was no more than stiffish cloth, the texture of canvas. The camera fitted tightly inside that, so that protection against impact was minimal.

I picked up the blue bag and held it in my hands. I held it gently, this small corpse sewn up in its canvas shroud and ready for burial. The fact was I liked the thing. I'd become attached to it, as you do to a piece of equipment that works well, and has been through a few experiences with you. I had a moment of sentiment. We'd endured the Ninety Mile Sands together Mavica and I, had been lost in the bush together, had faced the wild mountain woman, fallen down a tomo, and at night, its bright little replay screen had brightened some of my lonelier moments in the tent. . I don't want to go on about it, and when you're talking about a mate, dollar values sound crass. But digital cameras are expensive. The Mavica FD7 costs \$1400. I'd done a bit of fast talking with Sony and got it at a trade price, but I'd still paid over \$1000. On a journey where the financial margins were as narrow as mine, I couldn't afford to lose it.

I composed myself. My hand went to the zipper. I steeled myself to watch all the springs and electronic dust fly out of the thing. And then a force I can only describe as raw emotional intelligence kicked in. I, whose hand was always in the bag before my sister's hand could get there. I, who by nature bolted the single marshmallow, always had done, underwent a profound magnetic reversal.

I didn't open the bag. I have carried the bag over 50 kilometres since, over two days, and as I write these words, I have still not looked in the bag.

I will not look in the bag until I have finished writing this story, and then, if you must, I will look in the bloody bag.

I went on up. A hangdog, this-is-the-way-life-is, kind of smile had begun to play upon my lips. To get to the farmland I had to hack my way through briars with a pocket-knife and I sawed away at the big leaders, as thick as electric cord some of them, and pulled my way through the rest of the shoulder-high thicket. The two-tone sleeveless nylon jerkin I'd bought in China 15 years before, the one with the down stuffing, ripped. Not a big rip, but Peking duck feathers floated out and wafted away.

My camera - gone. My old jacket - destructing.

Life.

This is what Te Araroa teaches you. Wronged by fate, surrounded by drifting feathers, still you go on, and when you get to the top of the Mangaokewa Bluff, your rictus muscles have cranked your lips a notch higher than the hangdog smile. The progression to the hard-done-by smile is a small one, but it does have an element of determination to it.

The view! The river below ran sinuously into the distance. In normal times I would have photographed the scene. The gorge was wide and soft. Wide in that even small rivers seem able to open up a limestone landscape a kilometre or more across the top. Soft in that even though limestone columns buttressed the farm fields with their sheer faces, still, below those faces the angle of the land's descent became unthreatening, sloped on down at a nicely grassed 45 degree angle to the river flats. My side of the river was green farmland. The far side of the river was heavily bushed, sloping down from its own more distant limestone ramparts in a profusion of yellow-green tawa, stout totara, soaring kahikatea and punga ferns spattered along the river's edge.

Look - that's the best I can do at the moment, description-wise. It may not be good enough, but just this once - can you wean yourself off the need for a picture?

I picked my way down to the river flats. My side of the river was grassed and clean of any bush. The river flowed almost level with the land, and on the other side, the bush rose tall, unmilled, magnificent, just as New Zealand's early landscape painters had seen it. Big, virgin, podocarp forest. It was so clear and clean and perfect it was like looking through glass at some vast museum diorama. Take my word for it.

I walked along the flats. A small abandoned dunny stood there. It was roofed with corrugated iron. Its 4x2 construction was no more than a framework, for the fibrolite cladding had been smashed away, and the seat inside, the drop hole comfortably sanded, had been in disuse so long that moss had colonised the platform. Behind it, across the flat river, the bush still stood tall. It was culture and nature, standing toe to toe, it was a classic New Zealand scene - the tin-shed-in-paradise school of photographers would have clambered one over the other to get to it - and for a moment my resolve softened. Hell, maybe, just maybe, the camera had survived its fall. This was the sort of thing the Internet readers would want to see.

But I did not weaken. I was turning into the Einstein of all emotional intelligence.

I walked all day, diverting from the river's edge to make my way around patches of impenetrable blackberry, but following riverside stock trails most of the distance through intermittent stands of totara. I made camp for the night high up on a farm ridge where three fences intersected. I hung the blue bag on a fencepost, and after I'd pitched the tent, took it inside and stowed it, safe from moisture, in a corner.

Evening fell, a full moon rose. I could see all the way back to Pirongia, but not a single farmhouse light. During the night I heard nothing but the scratch of small field mice, the cough of sheep, the occasional lowing of cattle and the distant sounds of trains on the main trunk line.

Next day I walked on, coming finally to a quiet riverside road, and following it along. After three more hours, I'd completed my 35-kilometre hike up the Mangaokewa River. I was close to the Mangaokewa's headwaters when I left it. I'd camped beside the river as it flowed smoothly through deep bush. I'd watched and listened to its steeper rush and tumble over rapids. I'd crossed it once, Lekis in hand. I'd drunk from it, hoping my filter took out any trace of the Talon poison I'd seen noticeboarded on trees. I'd watched it dwindle in size from a small river 15 metres wide, to a stream no more than two metres across.

My route map showed I should now take a paper road that, according to the map at least, led due south five kilometres or so to join up with SH30 between Benneydale and Pureora Forest Park. The road was padlocked at its beginning, but I climbed the gate and followed the white limestone-metalled track into a pine forest.

The paper road tailed out after a kilometre. The land had once been a sheep farm, and an old woolshed stood at the road's end. The map insisted on a through road, but, if there had ever been one it was obliterated now by the pine plantation. The pines stood as high as Christmas trees, but they weren't yet big enough to have laid down that choking carpet of needles. Instead the meadow, un-grazed, grew lushly between the trees. A heavy rain began to fall.

No track, heavy rain, knee-deep grasses. Still, in a pine forest this size, you couldn't get lost. The trees were planted in straight lines. Occasionally rock faces on the steeper hills, or bogs in the valleys broke the regularity, but the pines fell rapidly back into line. I followed them through, pulling myself up some of the steeper country with great handholds of grass and heather. You couldn't get lost, but you could get very wet. The camera was buried deep in the pack, safe from moisture, but what exactly was it, I kept thinking, that I was so assiduously keeping dry?

I linked up with SH30 about when the rain stopped. I'd been steadily climbing since leaving Te Kuiti, the temperature had dropped, and I could see my breath now in the late afternoon light. A brilliant low-angle sun began burning the moisture off the world and the mist began to rise. Trees glowed against it. The

black railings and headstone shapes of Te Hape Marae's urupa rose mysteriously above a shallow valley of it. Then the sun set and the solid bank of cloud in the east turned bright orange.

The Hauhungaroa Range in front had spawned a long tube-like cloud, too low to be lit by the sun, and snowy white against the orange backdrop. It was a huge fat boa of a cloud like the detonation ring around an H-bomb explosion.

Not quite that distinct dough-nut ring, I grant you, but I liked the description. For beyond the Hauhungaroas lay a force that would dwarf even the Doomsday weapon the Russians produced in the 60s.

Taupo is New Zealand's biggest lake, and the North Island's biggest tourist town. It has a population of 21,000 and that triples in high summer. They come to water-ski, to catch trout, to video the Huka Falls, or to hole-in-one on the golf green that floats 100 metres off-shore and win a trip to Europe.

But ever since I was a kid, I've never looked at Taupo without seeing the heart of the North Island going bang. The last bang wasn't so very long ago - 189 AD. Something like 100 cubic kilometres of New Zealand soil darkened the globe. The effect was documented in China - they saw the stars during daylight, and in Rome.

But that wasn't the big one. Twenty-six thousand years ago Taupo blew out 800 square kilometres of sod. It went up, most of it came down again, and a great pyroclastic wave of tephra and gas rolled across the country at the speed of a jet plane. The wave lapped as far north as the Bombay Hills.

I was walking through cuttings where the pumice, that light volcanic froth, was metres deep in the cuttings. The territory was violent and the sunset was apposite. It was unusual. It was suggestive. I could have tried to photograph it, but I did not.

Night fell and a van screeched to a halt on the highway.

"Hey bro! You want a ride?"

"No," I shouted back at the van, but how far it is to Pureora?"

The van backed up, fast, and veered onto the wrong side of the road to stop beside me.

"You going hunting bro?"

The van interior was dark. Someone in dreadlocks leaned forward. I didn't feel like explaining that the Leki sticks, poking up with my storm cover draped over them to dry, could do 100 things but couldn't fire bullets. "No, I'm just walking in to Pureora."

A police ute came around the corner, U-turned, and pulled up on the road shoulder beside the van.

"Oh shit!" As the cop stopped, I got ready to explain that the van was doing me a favour, shouldn't be ticketed.

"It's alright, we know him," said the van-driver. The two drivers exchanged a curt nod, and the van took off, spitting gravel.



"That's Mongrel Mob, from Te Kuiti," said the cop. "They're okay though."

"You going to Pureora? I'm off up there to see Ra - you want a ride?"

I wanted a picture. They didn't make police like this in Auckland. The cop was Maori, shaven-headed, with heavy tats on the arms, the sole-charge policeman at Benneydale. If you lined him up in an identity parade with the Mongrels, you might not easily have told the difference.

He was pure gold. I was walking in? Okay he'd draw me a map to make sure I got to the right place within the forest headquarters' maze of metalled roads. He'd had hikers come into the park late before, and a few had taken wrong turns and gone into the forest.

"He started the map, then had a better idea.

"Forget the map - have you got a torch."

"Yes."

"Well, take it with you. I'll spraypaint direction arrows at the turnoffs."

I came in to Pureora picking out the green arrows on the road by torchlight... The cop had taken my pack and had agreed to drop it at Ian Marshall's house, the DOC 2IC at Pureora.

Marshall was waiting on the lawn.

"Walked up from Te Kuiti, eh? Come in, I'll get you some kai."

"You've got the pack?"

"Yeah. You ran into Toots."

"That's a good cop."

"Yeah. He looks more like a crim than a cop, but he's a good guy. Good at his job. I wouldn't want to be on the other side of him. That's bad. I've heard that's well bad."

Off the road then, after a long day. Sitting in front of a stoked hot box, gradually drying. Safe. Fed.

The conversation drifted to Taupo. It was just over the hill, and Marshall mentioned a level one alert on the lake.

"A level one alert! On Taupo?"

"So I was told."

"It was on the news?"

"No there's been nothing in the media."

"So who told you?"

"Catherine at the Tihoi Adventure School."

I rang Catherine. Yes, the water had begun to boil around a reef, and there was a stage one alert. She'd got the story from Dennis De Monchy. I rang De Monchy, who'd just come back from overseas to work on the Ruapehu ski-fields. He'd heard about the hot reef "It begins with 'H'" - when hitching out of Taupo. He had the card of the guy who'd told him the story, and gave me the telephone number.

The biggest bomb in the world could be starting to go off, and I was having to find out about it by unravelling the grapevine. I rang Don Kerr at Taupo.

"That's right, the Horomatangi Reef. It runs out from the side of the lake to the middle, 40 to 60 metres below the surface. There's activity there. It's deepseated, right in the core of the lake.

"At the moment you can get smoked trout without even pulling it out of the water," he joked - or I thought he joked. "I don't think this has happened before, not coming up from the bottom like that. The scientists here are monitoring it and if they get worried, it'll go to a stage one alert."

I checked further and Kerr was right. The big reef was seen as a plug to Taupo's core. It was being shaken by small tremors. Some uplift was occurring.

Was Taupo's lid lifting? The national press hadn't picked up the story, but it seemed to me, even before any formal first-stage alert that the story was a significant one, for Taupo's potential explosive power is colossal.

And I had to walk on - past that? The wind blasts alone from the last explosion knocked down whole forests about where I'm sitting now. Well, it makes your own problems seem minor, don't it?

Remember the blue bag? Days have passed since it bounced down the cliff, I have not looked inside it, and it has struck me that we are not dealing here with emotional intelligence, but emotional cowardice.

It is time. Pureora Village does not have mobile phone reception, so I will go up Mt Pureora to send this episode to the net. When I send it, I will open the blue bag. I will extract the Mavica and - if the gods are benign - take a digital picture of something, anything. If then this story ends with that something, anything picture then the story has a most happy ending. If it does not, then, kids, we have a problem.



### #31 Pureora State Forest

*A bird sings, a tree talks, and the deer hunters' guns stay silent*

At 7.30 on my second morning at Pureora, DOC's Ian Marshall took me out to listen for the kokako.

The bird with the blue wattles, the black eyemask, and the great voice is found in Puketi Forest, the Hunuwas, and at Mapara near Te Kuiti, and I'd been to all three forests, but heard nothing. When a kokako sings, I'd been told, you know it. You know it even at a distance for the bird's low notes have a resonance that can penetrate two kilometres through bush. But kokakos are rare.



**Kokako -**  
Courtesy of [Kiwi Wildlife Tours](#)

Now the olive silhouettes of the forest loomed in a dense mist. We stopped the truck, got out, and almost immediately I heard the sound of a glass gong.

Once, twice. "That's him," said Marshall.

Stupidly, I began to scribble. The mizzled atmosphere diluted the ink and it ran down the page as I tried to trace the song.

"Ah-ooh-WAH" I wrote in my notebook.

I look back at it now. The phonetics are like something from a comic. Water-smudged lines waver across the page in an attempt to record the bird's superb ability to swell and diminish its notes. "Interval of a fifth" I wrote, in the one note that still makes brittle sense. I used circles for the pure tone notes with their vibrant harmonics, and strokes to indicate the clicks and the little grace notes, the tooks.

The power of it in the mist! The impotence of the notation! Twice I simply wrote "yearning" and I look at the *aide-memoire* now and wonder why I bothered.

It may be that we need a ritual for the kokako's song, something that abolishes your wretched intelligence and opens your mind. Falling to your knees would do it.

The pure notes dropped from the top of a tall kahikatea, and the mist closed around them the way deep space encloses hanging globules of water, and then they vanished, rolling away from the borders of classification.

Marshall took me into Pureora's Pikiariki Block. By standing in the right place below the big trees I could see, jutting out from the epiphytes, the corners of wooden pallets. On the ground lay a rotting coil of rata vine.

"They used that," said Marshall, "to climb."

In the 1970s the Forest Service ran Pureora. It logged the old forest, root-raked, then Paraquated the

earth, set fire to the dessicated remnants, and replanted the bush with pine.

In 1978, a group of what would now be called NGOs, the Native Forest Action Council and others, called the Forest Service to account.

Twelve people slipped into the forest and climbed on vines up the giant trees. The twelve then lowered ropes to their support teams, hauled up pallets, lodged them in the epiphytes, tied on their leg-ropes, and settled down. New Zealand was set for its first tree-top protest.

In the morning the bulldozers arrived. Stephen King, his brothers Bernard and Sam, and the other nine watched the bush heave and sunlight stream into corridors as the bulldozers moved in on the totara giants.

I rang Stephen King later. Would anything have made them quit?

"What would you do," said King, "if you lived in an old mansion, full of treasures, and bulldozers started coming through the walls to wreck it?"

Television had headlined the protest and the loggers knew the 12 were in there, but not where. They may have suspected a bluff. At any rate, felling got underway. On the third day, loggers dropped two old giants, trees so old their interiors were rotted and the angle of their fall unpredictable. Then a third tree spoke. Bernard King, crouched on a pallet in a tree just 10 metres away from the crashing giants had risked death by his silence, but now he called out.

The cry so shook the Forestry Service workers they downed tools. The issue went to Cabinet, the government called a truce on safety grounds, then reprieved the Pikiariki block, the last remnant of giant totara in the country. The Kings had saved the Old Kingdom.

I stayed at Pureora Village for three days. Outside, rain swept the forest, and my next walk was a three-day bush traverse down the Hauhungaroa Range. The walk was classed as a route. That meant I could expect some markers, but it would be a fairly primitive track, nothing you'd want to do wet, and I waited for the sun, writing, listening to music, and reading the science magazines.



I set off at 7.30 am as the sun rose, and reached Mt Pureora's summit, on a track that was nicely boardwalked, at 11.30 am. I was 1165 metres up, and a freezing southerly numbed my hands. I crouched in the lee of the summit cooking up a packet soup of pea and ham and basking in the view. Lake Taupo lay blue to the east, the steep volcanic plug of Titiraupenga's summit stood immediately north, and beyond it, the Kinleith Mill sent plumes of steam skyward. Out to the north-west, made hazy by distance, was Pirongia.

I reached the first hut on the route, Bog Inn, at 3.30 pm and went to bed with the darkness, sound asleep until a powerful flashlight swept the room. I had a staccato vision of a Swandri swinging its pack off, and muttering the sort of stuff that shakes you awake.

"Whoop. I haven't unloaded the rifle."

Click, snick, snap.

"Yeah," the hunter was still talking to himself. "You're supposed to do that before coming into a hut."



**Jos Holten**

"You're late in," I said. "What's the time?"

"12.30."

I was talking to a good keen man, Jos Holten, from Ngatea. He had deer on his mind, and quizzed me right then. What track had I come down? Had I heard any stags roaring? Seen deer sign?

I hadn't.

The deerhunter poked his nose back out of the hut, opening a night full of stars.

"Hmmm. Windy."

"Meaning what?"

"The wind keeps away the frost. You've got to have the right days, and I like to think the frost makes a difference, Still, it won't be wet tomorrow. The deer are like cats. They like to hide away when it's wet."

I went to sleep and dreamed of a man with a gun. A flat yellow light came out the end of the barrel.

Next morning Holten was gone early. I ate cold rice from the previous night's cookup, and went over the hut book. Hunters used the hut mostly, but there was no boasting about deer kills, only the lack of them, the lack even of deer sign.

"Saw jackshit," wrote one hunter.

I was more interested in a tramping entry. Eric van Hamelsveld's party of three had lost their way just two weeks before on the route from Bog Inn to Waihaha Hut, turned eastward to try to break out of the bush toward Taupo, then stumbled back onto the track to Bog Inn just as night fell. By that time the Christchurch party was, as the entry had it, "cut to threads, bruised and demoralised." They reached the same hut they'd left in the morning, and the entry ended with manifest relief: "Partied hard."

Despite that warning, I made a similar mistake. An apparent trail led directly south from the hut, and I followed it, stumbling around for half an hour in a giant bog, with ice crunching underfoot, and swamp-water spilling into my boots, before examining the maps more closely and figuring that the only sure linkup to the Waihaha track was not to depart south from the hut at all, but to first retrace some of yesterday's route.

The path was then clear, the day was fine, and I was following the fresh spoor of Ces Holten's runners. I



tracked him for an hour, before the hunter veered off into bush, and just fifty metres further up the trail I picked up the high-heeled prints of a deer. Hunter and quarry had obviously heard each other, but I guessed the deer had given its hunter the slip, for I heard no shot that day.



***Coprosma foetida***

I tramped the summit ridge. *Coprosma foetidissima* grew along the trail, and I plucked it as I passed. I like this stuff. I like rolling the leaf between my fingers in contemplation of evolution's inventive defences. Like thinking of the moa plucking this same rather tender shrub, chewing it briefly, then *yeeeeetch!*

I like bringing the leaf suddenly to my nose, and there it is. The same recoiling head. The same *yeeetch!* The same bad gas that made the moa gag. The smell of a pungent fart.

Around me even the Halls totaras, slimmer, mountain versions of their more massive lowland cousins but still the biggest trees on these summit ridges, were clothed in green moss. The green velvet smothered everything but the trunks of the native fuschia. The tree frequently sheds its bark and it stood out pink and strangely muscular from the surrounding goblin forest, reaching up like human limbs from the earth.



**Halls totara**

I reached Mt Weraroa then descended into podocarp forest. Rimu, totara, matai, and miro, supported epiphyte cities high above me. The big trees opened up the forest floor to sunlight and strewed the ground with a pleasantly springy brown carpet. I was struck by the forest's own cycle of decay. Lost limbs had fallen across the track. They'd simply sheared from the parent trunk and lay there, still supporting their population of parasitic plants and vines.

Or whole giant trees had crashed. I saw three, one with the ground uprooted around it, and two whose trunks had simply split. The still-verdant foliage on one old fallen rimu suggested it had splintered and fallen within the past month.





I came in to Waihaha Hut at the end of an eight-hour tramp, and two more deer-hunters, Peter Faulkner and Bruce McMillan from Auckland, already had the range stoked and were cooking, and drinking their rum. They'd been hunting during the day but shot nothing. McMillan went to the verandah with his black growler tube later and gave a slightly disconsolate roar. No-one answered.

Deer, and the dreaming of deer, dominate the Hauhungaroas.

I completed my traverse next day through smaller forest of tawa and tanekaha, on a clear route where leaf litter crunched underfoot, where the trail again reached cloud level, where ruffled green profusions of liverwort edged the track, but when I reached the derelict Nuffield Hut at the end of the day, there it was again.

Hunters had used a candle flame to smoke onto the ceiling a giant stag with a joint hanging from its lips.

As I left the forest, I explored a deserted punga-log whare with a window made from a gutted TV set, and there it was again: the main picture, ripped from a magazine and stuck to the wall, six glossy eight-pointer stags.

Then I called into the first roadside farmhouse and saw, as befits a more substantial dwelling, and painted yet more gloriously now onto black velvet, another stag of your dreams.



**George Conrad**

George Conrad was a sheepfarmer, but he hunted. First question - had I seen deer or pig sign on the trail I'd just followed? This time I had, following the tracks of a big pig for whole kilometres during the last day.

The Hauhungaroa hills, Conrad told me, as I crunched his toast and marmalade, and drank his tea, were now short of game. DOC was grooming the bush, and flattening the deer with 1080, but what use was bush without game?

Through trampers like myself were rare - he estimated no more than five a year. Hunters outnumbered trampers 100:1 in this neck of the woods, but they were stalking discouragingly few animals.

"I go hunting once a fortnight. I would get a pig every two hunts - a deer every six hunts. DOC organised a contest over the roar, 20 March to 20 April, but the animal numbers were poor to non-existent, and my point is this. Why have native bush if there's nothing in it?"

I watched a video at the Conrad farmhouse, *Rails in the Wilderness*. It showed old footage of the railway that once penetrated 26 miles into the Hauhungaroa Range and brought down rimu and totara logs to the

steam saws of the Ongarue Mill. In the 1930s the now-vanished mill was the biggest in the country, its logging trains puffing along the longest bit of private railway in the country. The potter Barry Brickell talked to camera, recalling a ride on this steam engine as a youth, over gorges, through cuttings and overhanging canopies of bush. From that sprang his lifelong love of bush railway.

And then came a sequence that sat me bolt upright . The cameraman had shot from the rear of the train looking down the line of single totara and rimu trunks. Far in front, the engine blew up gouts of steam, but it was the tremendous girth of the timber that held your eye. And then, into shot like a stuntman in a movie, a singled man swayed and ran down the long line of the logs. With no more hesitation than a jogger high-stepping a puddle he jumped the fatal gaps between the logs, and went on, occasionally throwing his arms out for balance, until distance diminished the dance - a leaping lumberjack to chill the blood of OSH.

The force of it! The disappearance of it! The log man sealed in his jar, who was and never would be again. George Conrad was making a point: the old logging route was still there, he and his wife Sue had walked much of it - why could it not be developed for the tourists, the railway re-laid and lunches provided while the holiday crowd passed over the gorges, beneath the bush, and watched this very footage on video?

And I sat there thinking: whatever. But this is art. This is real art.

The Hauhungaroa track had brought me out too far west and at Conrad's suggestion I walked some ten kilometres south-east across his farm, and the neighboring one to bring myself back onto Te Araroa's proposed route through to Tongariro National Park.

I walked over the green tops towards the mighty valley of the Taringamotu River. I photographed an old stump on the farmland, evidence of the old clearances and a cliché now. Eric Lee-Johnson did black-stump New Zealand way back in the 1930s.

I thought about art. New Zealand has had a strong literary tradition of backblocks and bush people, the marginal farmers, the deer cullers. People recognised in it New Zealand values - mateship, vernacular speech, the hilarities and hardships of a new country - and whatever the tastemakers said, this was the main popular literature.



Writers like Jane Mander used timber camp settings, Frank Anthony's Gus Tomlin series gave the backblocks farm its humour, Jim Henderson dug the true stories on the hunters, the miners, the bushmen, the roadmen. It was a down-to-earth literature, and the list is long, but the final benchmark where you can see the tide turn and begin to recede is Barry Crump's books. Beyond those, all that has lasted into the 90s is Murray Ball's *Footrot Flats* comic strips.

New Zealand has become dominantly urban since, its writers and reviewers and journalists more concerned with style, of staying ahead of the game, of relegating New Zealand ideas back to their

decades, as if decades were prisons, and dismissing them as uncool.

I wasn't so sure. Walking Te Araroa, I was still meeting these country people, and their countryside and bush were still fundamental forces.

Some things have changed. The 90s trampers, with their polyprop, and Gore-Tex and pot nests have now overtaken the bushmen with their oilskins and blackened billies, and are probably more numerous now than the deer-stalkers.

The DOC scientists, university graduates with their rat tunnels, bird bandings, their mist nets, their concentrated excitement about the brown petals and rotten smell of the rare parasitic plant, *Dactylanthus taylorii* have replaced the Forest Service's roll-your-own blokes, and their seat-of-the-pants practical knowledge.

Trampers spend leisure hours in the bush, they don't work there. Those who do work there, the DOC scientists, are bringing the bush back to some kind of original state - I'd read DOC's latest strategic plan back at Pureora and it was titled, significantly, if not particularly accurately to the text, *Restoring the Dawn Chorus*.

Non-fiction literature at least has followed this trend. Beyond the high-quality taxonomies that J.T. Salmon and others are so good at, the flagship book of the 1990s is probably Geoff Park's *Te Uruora - The Groves of Life* (VUP 1995). The book chooses a number of perfect natural remnants, primal kahikatea stands on the Hauraki Plains etc, sets them in an historic, and cultural medium, and recalls a vanished radiance.

The new idea is clear enough - natural purity. Craig Potton's photographs, and those of Andris Apse, present New Zealand wilderness as an untouched place. Where once a photographer might have shown a waving summit party, now not even a footprint disturbs Potton's *Ruapehu's Crater Lake in Winter*. The image is spiritual - religious even. It has the same force that drove the Kings at Pureora in 1978. The old totara forests are spiritual groves. The kokako's song is a pantheist poem. The mountain has only its existential clarity. The new vision hangs in calendars and prints on the walls of the cities, and does not include galoshes, nor the blood of animals, nor tell a human story.

I don't know that it's yet enough. The new vision excludes our fumbling lives, and the skillful layers of our past. It makes no admission that it is a New Zealand culture that makes every decision, even the decision to frame people out.

I walked on. Maybe thirty kilometres away, the land sloped abruptly into cloud. I was approaching the mountains of the Central Plateau, but when I reached the Turangi-Taumarunui highway, I marked my place and hitch-hiked out. Te Araroa had a date with Environment Waikato. The Trust had been invited to give evidence to the regional council in support of our proposed walk up the Waikato River. I needed to break my journey to do it.

## #32 Tongariro Crossing

*Te Araroa meets Environment Waikato, is briefly buffeted by gales, sees a cracker sunrise, then crosses a mountain*



**Environment Waikato councillors**

Te Araroa Trust chairwoman Jenny Wheeler and I drove down to Hamilton to give a message to a full council meeting of Environment Waikato.

The regional council owns the stop-banks on the Waikato River. We asked them to open the stop-banks for a national foot trail, and we tied our request to one of the council's declared core functions -- enhancing public access.

We said it would be costless, except that the rental value of the council's riverside grazing leases might fall slightly. The trust itself would get the money to build stiles, and boardwalks over the few boggy bits.

We said the proposed walk, particularly between Meremere and Rangiriri, was highly scenic and had major historical interest too -- in 1863, the manoeuvres and battles along this river stretch decided the Waikato war. We said every farmer on the Meremere-Rangiriri section -- excepting only one drag-racing enterprise that was dubious but possibly persuadable -- had informally agreed to a national trail along these banks..

We made our pitch, but the hearings on the draft strategic plan to 2008 are busy days for council. We had twenty minutes, were questioned quickly, then Council Chairman Neil Clarke, thanked us, told us we'd be informed of council's decision in due course, I took a picture, and we were back on the street.

The Waikato River walk is a critical part of our trail. Like every good idea, Te Araroa is at present half rational, half dream. We had just rubbed shoulders with the rational side. An important part of Te Araroa had been put in the hands of these councillors, they would assess it, and it felt a little odd to pass the baton to people you didn't know.

"I think that went all right," said Jenny Wheeler.

"Yes, I think it went all right. It's hard to know."

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I took advantage of the break to re-equip myself for winter, and the mountain walks that lay ahead. I dropped the Olympus two-person tunnel-tent, and bought a Macpac Microlite, a single-hoop tent just big enough for a single person to squeeze into. It would be less pleasant, but it weighed less than 2 kg, and with winter coming on I needed to carry more food, fuel, and clothing. I bought a Snowflake down sleeping bag, a light tuck-away item that compressed to just half-a-loaf-of-bread size and which, used inside my existing sleeping bag, would convert it into a four-season item.

I took the train to Taumarunui, then hitchhiked back to my mark, and set off again, winding up the southern end of the Hauhungaroa Range. It was dark by the time I reached the top, and Taumarunui had shrunk to a small boomerang of light far below. I crossed the saddle under a starry sky to the Waituhi Lookout, wrestled with an unfamiliar tent by torchlight, and bedded down at 900 metres. To the south-east lay black space, but I knew what would be there in the morning. I rang home to boast that I would awaken to the best view in New Zealand: out across Lake Taupo and the mountains.

I awoke next morning in dense cloud, shook and folded the dripping tent, and got going.

I walked down to the entrance of Moeraki and Oraukuru Farms. Te Araroa had, when designing its trail, put in a letter to the Tuwharetoa trustees seeking a crossing here. The trustees had yet to decide on that, but meantime I had individual permission.

In 1997, Borge Ousland became the first man to cross Antarctica solo and unsupported, and I'd had the privilege of talking to him in Auckland straight after the epic crossing. He'd stayed sane by playing Jimmi Hendrix's Purple Haze on the ear-phones, and by seeking each day the best piece of art. Ousland's route across the ice was milestoned by goblins, popes, and Henry Moore women.



The daily art. There it was, just as I moved out of Moerangi and onto Oraukuru. Standing out in the middle of the shaggy oval, a little encrusted now but that was to be expected after so long out of the action: Richard Hadlee appealing for an LBW decision.

Ahead the flanks of Tongariro loomed brown and I came on through Rotoaira forest just as the sunlight died on the mountaintop. I walked out along Access Road No 4 and SH47 stretched away south, dark and straight. In the distance, a faint bar of light fell across the highway. I'd walked 30 km that day, but the last kilometre was the longest, the light resolving at last into a Caltex star, an accommodation sign for Eivin's Lodge, and a happy picture of a trout on skis: Troutski's Café - Open.

Years back I read a book called *Blue Highways* by a half-Indian American, William Least Heat Moon. He'd circuited America in a Ford van, had eaten at roadside cafes often and developed a system of classification: they were either one-calendar, two-calendar, three-calendar, or four-calendar joints.

Least Heat Moon judged the ma and pa four-calendar places as the best. He never explained why, but it always stuck in my mind as a good rule of thumb, maybe because the more calendars are hung in a shop - small advertising favours for the local garage, the local baker, the hardware shop - the more likely it is to have the grain of the local community.

Troutski's had two calendars on the wall, but I gave it four-calendar status anyway. It was part fast food, part general store. A winged terracotta pig hung from the ceiling with a legend hung round its neck - *Anything's possible*, and Mick Jagger was singing: *Sometimes I'm dancing on eh-yuh. And I get scay-yuh. I get scay-yuh*. Trucks rumbled past on the highway, and a fingernail moon was pulling the Caltex star



and the accommodation sign outside into a significant trilogy.

I wrenched myself away from a prolonged study of the shelves of food and drink, ordered up a burger and coffee and sat down. Two cats came out to stare at me.

Biker photos hung on the walls. A signed poster of John Britten's superbike took pride of place behind the counter. Close by hung a framed black and white photograph of a cartwheeling Ariel 1000cc square four, and two upended bikers, arms and legs akimbo, still in mid-air as they headed for the sandbags. It was captioned: "Cemetery Circuit, Wanganui, early 1960s." The cartoon cult biker, Werner the German, shouted "*Beinhart!*" from a huge poster alongside.



"You're into motorbikes," I said as Brent Mander came out with the burger, and cuffed away the cat that was sharpening its claws on the fabric seats.

"As much as I can be with a seven-day business," said Brent Mander. "The shop officially closes Xmas day, but my religious day off is boxing day - for the Wanganui Cemetery Circuit."

"You race there?"

"I have done. Bucket racing. You take a bucket of shit - I had a Honda - and you race it. It's the black version of bike racing - an unofficial budget-orientated, fun-oriented version. But usually I go to watch."

"And maybe you knew John Britten?"

"I only spoke to him once briefly at Manfield - long enough to get the poster autographed. He was a do-anything guy, and my assumption when he first had cancer was that it wasn't life-threatening, and I wisecracked that - well, in that case we can expect a breakthrough in cancer research. I felt mortified later when I heard it was terminal, but I gather he did achieve something in that line."

"Everyone has a poem in them," I said. "That bike was Britten's poem. He's a kiwi hero now, and I've seen one of the bikes at Te Papa, but everyone was slow to it at the start."

"The media misses a lot," said Mander. " Like New Zealand's international bike racers. The King brothers are close to the top in the 500cc motocross competition. Aaron Slight in the superbikes - third place for the past 4 or 5 years - Simon Crafar has gone into grand prix bikes. You hardly hear about it - only the rugby. Ivan Mauger had to win the world speedway solos four times before they decided to make him sportsman of the year.

"From my experience kiwis are interested in all sports but the media don't assume they are. And the reason John Britten became so big was that he had a bit of what a lot of kiwis know they've lost - that innovative do-it-yourself, find-a-way-round-it thing.

"We've become like America - we like to think of ourselves as outdoor, rural, fix-it people but most of us aren't anymore. Eivin next door is very much of the if-something's-broke-how-do-I-fix-it, rather than the



where-do-I-buy-another-one school. Someone at 72 who can run a camp like this - it's one of New Zealand's best-kept secrets - and still do a chinup to the rafters. He's still got it."

Eivin himself was overseas when I booked in, but his wife Lorraine gave me to a cabin, fully heated at just \$12.50 a night, and with an outlying toilet, laundry, and shower block. It was all that a tired tramper could ask for.

My wife Miriam Beatson arrived next day to do the Tongariro Crossing walk with me, but when I rang DOC at Whakapapa, the forecast was forbidding.

"There's snow down to 1500 metres, south-west winds between 75 and 90 kph - gale force," said the phone voice. "Stay off the track, it's dangerous. I've already had one group call in by cell-phone from near Red Crater. They've abandoned the crossing. They're coming back."

"What if," I asked, "we walk up to Ketetahi Hut, overnight there and try for the crossing tomorrow?"

"Okay, you're coming from the northern side," said the DOC woman. "You'll be in bush, then you'll be on exposed mountain-side for an hour. The wind will try to blow you off the track, but it'll be uncomfortable rather than dangerous."

"And tomorrow?"

"It could be clear in the morning - then we've got more high winds coming in."

Miriam was already well-equipped, and waterproofed her pack further with a plastic rubbish sack. I went across to Troutski's, bought a woollen hat and, in hope of glaring snow the following day, sunglasses.

Brent Mander had written the same weather forecast onto his noticeboard.

"It's not looking good."

"We'll go anyway - as far as Ketetahi tonight, then hope."

Mander took me across to an aerial photo of the National Park's three big mountains. Tongariro's truncated bulk stood in the foreground, and the store-owner showed me where the route went through.

"I hope you're sure about what you're getting into. Mountain weather is changeable anywhere in the world and the weather on these mountains even more so. Just over here is the sea, and that maritime climate makes the mountains doubly unpredictable. The winds come in over 1000s of kilometres of ocean, and all sorts of pornography can happen very quickly. It's like the old joke about where a 500lb gorilla sleeps - wherever he wants. That's the weather around here - whatever it wants to be."

One of the newspaper clips on his noticeboard was a Wanganui Chronicle item on a 1992 death on the mountain. A fit Turkish-German 21 year old had gone up Tongariro too lightly clad and simply froze to death.

"Once you get onto the track, don't be afraid to turn back," said Mander. "Thousands of people do this walk, but I don't like the word walk. It's a hike. It's great - but you have to respect it. And stay warm. Hypothermia - by the time you start getting woozy it's because the brain is shutting down from lack of blood. At that stage your friends can save you. If you're on your own, tough, you may not even know what's happening. I'm told they found one fatality with his head and shoulders in his pack. Scrabbling to

get his warm clothes out."



It was mid-afternoon when Miriam and I set out. We wound through the lower reaches of the old volcano in bush, and got our first whiff of sulphur from the Mangatipua Stream. At just over 1000 metres the track emerged onto tussock and the knock-down wind.

A driving hail rattled on our hoods. Drifts of the stuff, no bigger than hundreds and thousands piled up around the tussock. Then it changed to snow. Miriam's rubbish-bag-covered pack crackled and snapped in the wind, and we staggered in the gusts, but kept a good pace and reached the faintly roaring cleft of Ketetahi springs just as daylight began to fade.

A DOC sign warned that trampers on the Tongariro Crossing had no right of access to the springs, but we were in no mood for stopping anyway. The hut stood above us on a ridge, and the wind swept us in finally through the streaming heads of tussock.

The hut was cold, DOC had removed the gas heaters after a problem with the things flaring, and a half dozen candles provided the only light. Still, the seven people who'd arrived before us were bustling around in the semi-dark. It was warm civilisation of a sort, and it got better.

I served Miriam a freeze-dried meal.

Three young Auckland women sat at the same table. They'd already eaten, and they were idly melting candlewax over the flame, awaiting the action.

"Mmmmm. That looks nice - what is it?" said their leader.

"Mushroom and vegetable pilaf, with couscous," I said.

"Cuss cuss - what's that?"

"It's made from cracked wheat. It's a Mediterranean dish," I explained.

The couscous had come out in slug-like rolls that were pure gluten on the outside, tending towards a dry centre. I don't know what I'd done wrong, but to get the food down your throat you had to work your oesophagus as violently as a chook.

"Mmmmm. Whatever it is, it looks nice - is it?"

"Yes, it's fine," I said.

"Is it?"

The question was aimed at Miriam.

Miriam is the most loyal person I know, but she is also entirely honest.

"Mmm-m-m-m-m-m?"

It was a doubtful assent, and the Leader of the Pack pounced.

"Ah cuss cuss," she declared. "Now Josie. When we do our geography paper - you know the one - Epsom Does Not Exist Except as a Concept in the Minds of the Rich - should we include the delectable cuss cuss as part of their diet?"

"It's pronounced couscous," I said.

The stropky Auckland trio had after-dinner plans for the hut. First-up - table crawling.

"Axe-murderer Helen here," declared the Leader of the Pack, indicating her quieter, knee-hugging companion, "is a champion table crawler."

"What, is table crawling?" asked one of the foreign group

"The axe-murderer Helen will give a demonstration."

You lay face first on the tabletop, you went down and under the tabletop, you came up the other side of the tabletop, and hauled yourself back to the start position. During that circuit, you didn't touch the floor.

"I'd heard New Zealanders were mad," said Susan, the English doctor, from the shadows under the bunks as Helen gave the demo.

I was next. Someone grabbed my camera and took a flash pic of the ascent phase. I have filed it in my "Te Araroa's Most Manic Moments" folder. It was grimly slow, but successful, and as I lay prone back on the table top I heard the Leader of the Pack up the ante.

"Where I come from, they do this with packs on their backs," she cried.

And one by one, while we beat out bongo rhythms on the tabletops, everyone had a go. On and on, into the night, bonding with Tom from Scotland, and Kristen from Thailand, and Darren the architect, until, under the guidance of the Pack Leader, it was final confession time. Tell us your most embarrassing moment: Susan the English doctor won that one, I thought, with her tale of putting the wrong name on a death certificate.



Miriam and I got up before sunrise. Ketetahi Springs was churning beyond the ridge and sending up wild streamers of steam. The air smelled of sulphur, and from this 1400-metre vantage looking north, the land below stretched away to the horizon dark and rumpled, with inset mirrors - the lakes of Taupo and Rotoaira.

Short of serious mental malaise it is impossible not to be optimistic around a high-altitude dawn. Sol was climbing the right-hand cheek of earth. That's right, he was coming, and the bands of orange, pink and purple grew ever more vibrant until - Whack! - he broke the horizon and slanted a long yellow laser our way. The big tussock heads stood out suddenly like a colour illustration from the lines of the still-sombre text behind.

We watched the lower territories gradually light up. We ate rice risotto on the verandah. We talked to a pippit on the railing. My God, we were happy as fools. The DOC man, Bruce Ferguson, wrote the weather forecast onto the board. Clear through the morning, closing down in the afternoon. The predicted window of blue sky was moving through right on time.

The trail zigzagged up from the hut, through the intricate pillows of mountain vegetation.

"Look Hef - a gentian."

Miriam is a great sub-snow-line companion. She knows the name of the alpine flowers - even down to the Latin classifications.

"And look, a harebell. And these little lichen, crying out to the sun."

Snow berries, mountain daisies - I'd loaned her a Leki stick, and as the carbon-steel tip darted into the matted vegetation and forced one after another individual to stand to attention, I made a mental note to add one more item to my *1000 Uses for a Leki Stick* list - botanical pointer.

We climbed to the bare rock, and ash.



Tongariro is the ravaged old giant of the national park with six craters and one volcanic cleft. As befits the compensations of age, it has accumulated the most jewelry.

Blue Lake Crater, for starters. Blue, round, and looking distinctly semi-precious, set there amidst its circle of ice-encrusted rocks.

Down, then across the dun-coloured Central Crater, a signet slug of old lava surged halfway across it.



On to the emerald lakes, the first and smallest of them frozen over and purely green. Fumaroles sent up clouds of steam from the shoreline of the largest lake, but it was edged with ice. My intrepid wife decided nonetheless to take a dip.

I sat eating dead-cold bits of chocolate. Dependent on who was putting on the extra items of clothing, or stopping for the drink break, we'd been passing, or been passed by, our companions from the hut all morning. But now strangers materialised on every outcrop.

They'd come through from the Mangatepopo Hut side. They were taking photographs, eating muesli bars, staring down at the views, and the clear mountain air was freighted with foreign accents. Above us, more people poured two by two over the summit of Red Crater. It was rush hour on the Tongariro Crossing. They moonstepped down the fine scoria in giant strides. Animated long johns strode past, their primary banded colours matching the purity of the emerald lakes, the red crater, the blue lake.

And then, as suddenly, they disappeared. I looked north, and a big bank of cloud rose over the ridge.

Miriam dressed, and we slogged up the side of Red Crater. With the eerie swiftness of mountain weather, the clouds rolled in, and by the time we'd climbed up the smoking cleft and onto Red Summit, there was nothing to photograph but my own Brocken spectre.

We came down an icy ridge onto the shallow snow and ice-encrusted mud of South Crater. Two more tramping parties came towards us out of the mist, and vanished.

I tried later to deduce why people flock to the Tongariro Crossing. Partly, the mountain's great clarity



simply encases you, like a block of glass. You feel - bulletproof, yet you also know it is a trap.

The subdued violence of it is a separate thing. The fissures billow and reek. You can hear the water boiling underground, and if you sit on those sulphur-stained rocks the steam washes over you, scalding hot and then, by a waft of air, freezing cold with the condensate. It is pole to pole extreme. There is no sound, and yet there is the sharp rattle of a falling rock. Everything waits, and I suspect a Queen Street preacher could declaim from these ridges the Book of Revelation - *He opened the seventh seal and there was silence in heaven for about half an hour* - and every pair of longjohns would stop in mid-stride. They might even listen up for what happens next.

We came to a signposted junction. That way down to the Mangatepopo Hut. This way up to a second mountain top. The mist was thick now, and the junction had elements of dream. Shadowy figures moved around us. The pale wooden sign that said *Ngauruhoe Summit: Two Hours* - what summit? The poled route stretched away into blankness. As I watched, a load of ice slipped off the sign and burst on the ground. A red pack was buckled to it, an ice axe hung from it - neither had an apparent owner. Heat-welded rocks reared in the mist, knobbed like iron, taller and more grotesquely extruded than anything down on terra firma. Six hooded human figures stood on top of the rocks.

Miriam and I walked down the old lava flow to the Mangatepopo Valley. The front-runners of a group that'd passed us in the mist across south crater were returning. They'd struck me then as unusual. One guy with a poncho made from a blanket. Another with camouflage trousers, and a KC insignia on his jacket - King Cobra? Bandannas. Sports shoes.

The first one to come past us now had no jacket, only a rough-weave shirt.

"They told me I'd be too cold, but nah. My father comes from the coldest part of Hungary."

He went on by, ignoring the track, making a swifter descent.

A second guy in jeans and sneakers and a black knitted cap over stringy blond hair kept pace for a while. They were part of a YMCA group that was on a six-week adventure course. They'd done the luge at Rotorua. They'd tramped. They'd camped. They'd gone caving at Waitomo. Next, they'd canoe the Whanganui River

"We've been together two weeks. We're family now, eh? It's been choice. It's so choice."

He talked. He was bursting with it all, then he left us and rock-hopped on down.

The mountain unifies you.

We passed them again 15 minutes later, having a smoke at the foot of the lava while they waited for the rest of their party. I guessed they were a bad boys group, the sort the voluntary social welfare organisations pick up and give a grounding in something totally unfamiliar, the outdoor pleasures of the New Zealand middle class.

Ngauruhoe appeared suddenly, briefly, at the back of us, slanting straight up to a near-perfect white-topped cone. I remembered the eyes of the black hat boy. That the world could be this good. His eyes - there was no other word for it - had shone.



### #33 Night Ascent

*Te Araroa goes over the top*



I was sitting in the Troutski café. I had my laptop on the table, writing, and a guy came in to buy a burger. Trousers tucked into his gumboots, I caught his eye. I knew him, but for the moment couldn't place him. I waited for his own recognition, but nothing happened. He took the burger outside to a table in the sun, and I got on with my work.

"Geoff Chapple." The gumboots guy slid into a seat at my table.

"Right. Kieran McKay," my recall was suddenly instant. In 1995 I'd choppered into the Pearse Valley to do a story on a cave-diving expedition gone wrong. Two divers, Kieran McKay and David Weaver had gone down the Pearse Resurgence and set a New Zealand depth record of 85 metres. But then Weaver had begun to sink, folded up on a ledge another 10 metres down, and when McKay got to him, his mouthpiece was out, and he was dead.

It was one of those stories that never leave you. When I arrived, the dive team had set up a net across the Pearse River. If the body was borne up by the upwelling Pearse Resurgence, they'd catch it, but Weaver was weighted, and never did come. I remembered McKay toasting his dead friend with a beer at the campsite. He was high on the death the way people are at funerals. But I'd seen it before - after the excitement subsides, the leaden finality begins. Weaver's body had stayed down the hole for months - it was too deep for retrieval by any scuba divers - then an Australian team using heli-ox mixture fetched it.

"I always wondered how you coped," I said to McKay.

"For six months," he said "it was horrible. When they got the bones out and he was cremated and sent back to England, it got better."

"And what are you doing now?"

"I'm an outdoor instructor with the Sir Edmund Hillary Outdoor Pursuits Centre just down the road."

"Oh right." I said. "You may be able to help me."

I explained Te Araroa, told him I'd just done the Tongariro Crossing and that my walk was now

approaching Ruapehu. The route from Mangatepopo hut would follow DOC's round-the-mountain trail through to Whakapapa Village, 1157 metres up on the western flank of the mountain.

I told him I'd nursed an ambition to climb the mountain on my way through. At around 2,700 metres it was the highest peak in the North Island - it seemed a shame not to. But a winter climb on an icy summit was a different proposition from going up in summer. It needed the right weather, and a skilled climbing companion. McKay had a think.

"The weather forecast is excellent for the rest of this week. I haven't heard of anyone going up the mountain though."

There was a long pause. I was willing him to say it, but he wasn't the sort of guy who needed any encouragement on impromptu adventures.

"I'd like to do it - "

"Yes."

"But I'm working."

He'd try to get time off. When I'd finished my walk around to Whakapapa next day we arranged that I'd ring him.

I made the walk on an icy track. Every puddle was a plate of ice. I started early, the first one across, and it was a kid's fantasy of breaking a thousand windows without angry consequences.

I came around and the mist lifted just as I hiked through the beech forest approach to Whakapapa. Ruapehu stood there, its long summit ridge in plain view. I booked in at the Whakapapa Skotel, and rang McKay late afternoon.

"It's raining here," he said. "What's the mountain like up there? Clear?"

"It's clear."

"I can't get time off from work," he said.

"Right." I was disappointed, but you take what comes on a trail.

"So the only time I could do it is tonight."

"What!"

"Not if you're not into it." The voice on the end of the line sounded slightly defensive. As if it often put up propositions the rational world rejected.

"Tonight!" I said, trying to adjust to an idea I hadn't remotely considered.

"Yeah - it'll be incredible up there. We can drive to the Top of the Bruce and climb from there. We can be up and back in five or six hours, but it'll be very cold."

Another pause, and McKay filled in the gap with more detail.

"If it stays clear, you'll see the glow of Auckland and Wellington."

I went back to my room, and put on everything. Two pairs of long johns, then shorts. Two summer-weight polyprop tops, and one winter-weight top, a wool jersey, a down jacket, and the wool hat. I stuffed overtrousers and my anorak into the pack, filled two bottles of water, threw in a survival blanket, my first aid kit, the Snowflake sleeping bag, a torch and spare batteries.

I strapped the Lekis onto the pack, and I pulled on a pair of Thorlo inners, and my heaviest-duty Thorlo socks over those - ready.

McKay arrived at 7.15 pm. He was in no hurry, and we ate a leisurely two-course meal, drank coffee, and talked.

"Mountaineering" I said, "must seem a little tame after the cave diving."

"No. I find the mountains more intimidating than the caves. It's the unpredictable nature of it. You may think you can plan and predict but I know friends who have tried that and some of them are dead. On a cave dive, I'm dealing with water, and tanks, and darkness. Those are fixed things and that's all there is. But I've been up the side of Mt Cook and ten minutes after I've been through, seen the ice cliffs crash - there was no way of knowing. I deal with that by being a conservative mountaineer and I tend to listen to my feelings. If I don't like something I won't do it."

"You've climbed Cook?"

"No, but Cook has taught me a bit. The mountain is always going to be there and if you're happy with yourself, your team members, and the environment you just sit there and wait for the ice conditions to be right."

We went out to the car. McKay had brought extra climbing gear for me: the padded leather lace-up inners, and stiff plastic outers of climbing boots. Woollen mitts. Crampons. An ice axe. A hard hat.

We toggled up, and drove to the Top of the Bruce. Sodium lights cast an orange glow across Happy Valley, the big snow-groomer garages there, the apres ski café and the first aid room at Iwikau Village... The place was deserted. Security lights winked under the eaves. Below, the cloud lay in a quilt that had half-encircled Ngauruhoe, and edged up to within a kilometre of Ruapehu. The cold air flowing down off the bigger peak was keeping it at bay.

I unstrapped the Leki sticks.

"Lekis. How do you find those?"

"You want to try one?" I handed it across, and McKay adjusted the pole, and dug it into the tarseal.

"They're sprung, that's nice."

We turned to the mountain. It was 9 pm. The moon was high up, a waxing gibbous that cast a ghostly light on the white ridges above.

"Okay," said McKay. "Let's rock 'n roll."

We set off up a concrete ramp. It tailed off into a 4WD track, then dwindled further to a poled route over tumbled rock. We climbed for half an hour, clambering through rock and snow patches, then came across two mountain tents pitched on a small promontory.

The tents were deserted, but on the mountain flanks above, a light came winking towards us. A shadowy procession was winding down the mountain.

McKay leaned on his Leki, waiting for them to come.

The small procession gonged sporadically, like a camel train.

"That's the ice axes hitting the rock - hard case eh?" said McKay.

A guy with a helmet lamp led the team up to us.

"How's it going."

"Oh, wonderful."

"How far did you go?"

"Up towards Glacier Knob, then we struck ice - oh - Kieran."

"I was waiting for you to recognize me Ron."

Ron Stier was a fellow instructor at the OPC. He'd just taken a young group for a spin, and they were spending the night out, camped in the mountain tents.

"You going to the top? Yep. I did that five months ago. It was a night like this. We got to the summit ridge and a big hand came over the top. It socked right in, and we took four hours to get down in a white-out. Watch Ngauruhoe. If it disappears, get out of there. How long up do you estimate?"

"Three, four hours maybe."

"There's a cave just up to the right, above the tents. Call in on your way down. I'll give you a cup of tea."

We made the transition to a different mountain. Not the Ruapehu of the rough and rocky volcanic flanks, but the aloof Ruapehu that had drawn a cold white cloak around itself, distilled from winter air.

The mountain began to seem less benign. Out to the left were the Pinnacles where an avalanche had buried two climbers just over a year ago. We kicked footholds in crisp snow, going up the lee side of Knoll Ridge, close to its rounded top.

"See this." McKay cut a square in the snow with his Leki, and levered out a chunk four centimetres deep. It came out easily, a distinct layer.

"It's the beginnings of a slab avalanche. The snow gets blown from the windward side and pulverised and

compacted into hard layers."

He pushed the chunk and it slid away downhill.

"If it was any deeper, I wouldn't be walking on this."

Over the ridge, and into a 25-knot wind that cast stinging ice particles into your face. On this side, the ridge was coated with thin ice. I'd done some climbing before, but I was no expert, and I simply followed McKay's lead, stamping through the crust with the hard boots.

The ice had thickened slightly. I stamped and transferred weight, but my boot skidded sideways and I slid down the slope a metre or two before stopping myself, stretched full length, one woollen mitt clamped onto a nearby rock with the tenacity of a star-fish.

McKay turned to watch me lever myself carefully to my feet..

"It might be time for the crampons," I said.

"Just stand upright," said McKay. "Kick the edges of your boots into the ice and don't lean into the slope. If you try to hug the slope, you'll slide."

He turned back, and took a step.

I looked down at my feet, kicked the edge of the boot in, looked up.

A slowly flapping thing, like a manta ray, was gliding smoothly away downhill.

It made 20 metres, picking up speed.

It had a fascinating natural grace. Far more slicky adapted to the interface of mountain and cold sky than any clunky boot-stamping mountaineer, it slid away faster and faster, and then it began to spoil that natural grace. The manta began erecting a tent. I saw a pole come up at an angle. I saw it rise to vertical. I saw powdered ice spray from the bottom of it in a glittering shower. The slide stopped.

*Uses for a Leki Stick: #111 - Self Arrest. To stop any uncontrolled slide down an icy gully with rocks at the bottom, raise your Leki and jam the carbon tip into the ice. Try to keep pole vertical.*

"That," said McKay after he'd climbed back up the slope, "was a very graphic demonstration of self arrest. That's the first time in ten years of mountaineering I've had to use it in a real situation."

We put the crampons on. We unstrapped the ice axes. We came up to a rock overhang buttressed by snow that sloped down to a short wall of ice. Our direction of travel had to be sideways along that wall. You could lean some weight over the top it, but there was little foothold on the slippery vertical. Like the valley slide, a fall here wouldn't be fatal, but it was a fall onto rock, and definitely unpleasant. McKay went across and I waited. This was still elementary climbing but, for the first time, it was what they call technical.

"Dagger the ice axe in," I had a moonlit instructor, on the far side calling the shots. My axe bit through snow onto the top of the ice wall. I leaned my weight onto it, and eased out over the drop.

"Now kick the front of your feet into the ice." I did that. I felt the front crampon spikes bite and hold.

"Now the other foot. Move one thing at a time," said the instructor.

I swung the other foot in.

"Get both your feet into a comfortable position, then use the ice axe again."

I edged across, and we went on. I'd read the mountain climbing books and found them obsessed with the detail of the climb, and not the mountain. I could see why. It's the technique of the hard yards that absorbs you, and it takes 100% concentration. I imagine the dreamers don't get to write the books, they simply get winnowed away.

But it looked safer now. White billows lay all around us, lit along the roll like the big swells of an ocean beach under moonlight. They were icy, but if you plunked all ten crampon points straight down your foot stuck nicely.

Above us was the night mountain, sleeping in its white cloak while we did our small things. Not quite asleep. A pocket of crater gas slid past. Hydrogen sulphide.

We came up to the region dubbed Restful Rocks. McKay called a halt and we sat down in the lee of a rock clump hung with icicles. He broke out hot Milo, and peanut-buttered crispbread. We sucked from the water-bottles too, now no longer a liquid but an icy sludge.



We were very high, and it was very cold. I'd sweltered under my six layers up to now, but noted my body temperature had now sunk to neutral. Cloud still covered much of the land below - we wouldn't see the glow of Auckland and Wellington tonight, but the lights of Taupo were clear out to the north-east, and westward there was a city-sized sprinkle.

"That's Wanganui."

McKay looked around, and he was happy. "Incredible, isn't it? To be completely out on your own while the rest of the world is asleep. Just you and a moonlit wilderness. It's a neat feeling."

I broke out the camera, took off a glove to do it, and snapped the scene.

I looked down at my feet and the glove was gone. I didn't feel too bad about that. Earlier in the night, McKay had dropped a glove, the wind had taken it a distance, but we'd searched by torchlight and found it easily enough. The wind was stronger now, but there were plenty of little lee shelters around the rocks here. I searched by torchlight, but couldn't see it. McKay came and cast around. No glove.

"We can't go on if you haven't got a glove," said McKay.



"You're joking."

"The wind chill is well below zero, the higher we go, the colder it's getting. In these conditions there's a chance of frostbite," said McKay.

"I'll keep my hand in my pocket."

"This is a big serious mountain. You can't keep your hand in your pocket on a big serious mountain."

End of story. We were going down. The guy was a machine that operated precisely within the safety guidelines. There was no overriding mateship, just the rules, and I felt a fool. Something as simple as losing a glove had sabotaged an expedition.

"I'm wearing two pairs of socks," I said. "I'll take one pair off and put them on my hand."

"Right - we'll keep going then."

As simple as that.

At 12.08am we reached a dip in the Summit Ridge, the Notch. For hours, I'd been looking up, and suddenly I was looking down. The ridge fell away steeply to the summit plateau. The moon was sinking behind us now, bright enough to cast shadows, and two dark figures stood on the white floor 40 metres below. They moved when we moved, waved when we waved.

We looked around a huge moonlit amphitheatre.

The summit ridge curved away into the left-hand distance, and Ruapehu's northern-most peak rose there off the plateau floor a kilometre or so away - Te Heuheu, squat, powerful, black-slabbed. A more slender and precipitous formation reared straight up from the flat snow directly opposite. It was no more than 800 metres away, and astonishingly beautiful - Cathedral Rocks, frosted, and steep, and very tall for something that seemed made only of a luminous dust. To the right stood a big white hump, the Dome.

"Surreal eh?" said McKay. "Like the moon, but a bit more wind."

We went down the ridge towards the plateau, headed south in deep crunching snow, then came up to another ice wall, higher than the last. We swung the ice axes in an arc, embedded the long stainless steel spikes into the rounded top of it, hauled upwards, kicked inwards, and ascended on the cantilevered platforms of our own boots.

We climbed on towards the Dome.

I had one ambition on Ruapehu, to get to the Dome, and look down on Crater Lake. Pictures of it I'd seen all my life, pleasantly strange, a big green pond set into white downs of snow, gently steaming.

Not at all. It was a volcanic throat. If you wanted to see Dante's innermost stone circle of hell, it was embedded right down there in the moonlight. The cliffs of Pyramid Peak directly opposite, and the higher-still, nastier-yet chasms of Tahurangi yawned away into it until those precipitous rock walls became more definably a throat and descended, like rings of neck cartilage, another sheer 40 metres to a black pool.

"The level has sunk since the eruptions," said McKay.

I saw only half of the lake, the undulating snows of the Dome foreground hid the rest. I didn't have any desire to go closer. I didn't even want - as they say - to soak up this scene. Maybe it was the time of night, but I found it actually frightening, and I turned away. We sat in the lee of Dome Shelter and sipped more of the Milo, then it was time to go.



Te Heuheu and Cathedral Rocks shimmered across the moonlit distance as we stood up, and I turned to Kieran.

"I'll never forget this, and I want to thank you for bringing me here. But I think you're a creature of this place in a way I will never be."

"I love it," said McKay.

"Why?"

"Just look at it. Because it's so wild and beautiful."

We left Dome Hut behind. I looked back, and the weather side of it was unrecognisable as a human construction, covered with ice, like someone had dripped clear candle wax all over it. I looked up at the half moon. It was sinking now, rocked onto its back like a yellow boat. The wind was behind me, the flying ice particles bouncing harmlessly off my back, I'd climbed the mountain, done it, and -

McKay sensed the mood

"Don't forget, we're only halfway home. Accidents are most likely to happen on the way down. You tangle your crampon points in your trousers, you fall, you slide. Don't lose concentration."

Sure.

We came back onto the clear foreheads of ice on top of the ice wall. Concentrate. I backed down, and swung the ice axe as precisely into that glassy dome as if I was under orders from Stalin.

And then we were back over the ridge and flying on a different route, down the Gut in powder snow. Big leaping steps but it hardly mattered here. My crampons caught in my trousers and I fell and rolled. Deep powder. Great.



At 1800 metres we came back to the OPC camp, and McKay hunted intensely through the big basalt blocks above it until he'd found the cave. He woke Ron. The cave was small and hung with icicles. It had room enough for just two sleeping bags, and that was Ron and one of the students. We sat outside - someone had built a dry-stone wall across the cave entrance with just a small gap at the top, and we chatted at them through the slit. We had one thing on our minds, but you don't wake someone in their own house at 3.15 am and make strident demands.

The OPC instructors chattered on. It seemed to me the unspoken was not going to get spoke, so to hell with etiquette.

"Ron," I said.

"Yeah."

"Remember you promised to make us a cup of tea on the way back?"

"Yes I did say that. Do you have any water?"

We sipped hot sweet tea. Away to the west, the moon slowly sank from sight, blood-red, directly behind the black and perfect pinnacle of Taranaki.

## #34 Whakapapa - Manganui-o-te-Ao

*Te Araroa gets bushed in tiger country, and reaches the Manganui-o-te-Ao river*

I set off from Whakapapa, following the round-the-mountain trail for a time then branching off on a boggy Mangahua Track to reach National Park township. In the afternoon I crossed the main trunk line that runs at the back of National Park and set off up a 4WD route - Fisher's track.

I followed a trail attractively edged with toitoi and mountain cabbage trees into Erua Forest. The stopover ahead was Te Ruke Lodge, a remote farm-stay on the Retaruke River just 14 kilometres away, but few reached it this way. Te Ruke's tourists came in by road, typically stayed a few days helping with the farm and riding horses, then left again on the Kiwi Experience bus.



But I was rapt by a blue afternoon where, in one ten-minute span I left Ruapehu behind me in the east, and topped a ridge to see the faint perfection of Mount Taranaki in the west.

Glad too that someone - no names, no pack drill - had slipped me a stack of freeze-dried tucker. This wasn't the commercial product with pictures of happy hikers on the packets. The shrink-wrapped foil was olive drab, and the black print simply named the content and gave brief instruction to empty the content into a canteen, add water, then heat - army rations.

Not, you understand, that the food itself was drab. Muesli with its own milk powder and sugar mixed in. Khaki tubes of condensed milk, apricot jam, raspberry jam. Cabin bread. Instant soup. Whole freeze-dried meals of beef slices and beans, beef curry and rice. Diced apricots for desert. Tea-bags in sealed plastic covers. Single servings of coffee.

That stash of army food was a boon. Between where I now stood and Wanganui lay 140 km of rough travel, and not a shop in sight. The map showed range after range of steep soft land, and it showed no more than a handful of those little black squares that denote houses.

The New Zealand Government once enticed the ex-servicemen of World War I into this remote region with cheap rehab loans. The ex-soldiers cleared the land, and brought in sheep. In the 1920s the price of wool slumped and many amongst those first small-holders walked off. Farming here was too hard, too lonely, and, stripped of bush, the flanks of the razorback ridges slid constantly into the gullies. In 1936 the MOW spanned the Mangapurua Valley with a concrete bridge, but what was laid in hope became only a symbol of the broader failure. Its approach roads, like the abandoned farms, were finally overtaken again by bush, and it was named: the Bridge to Nowhere.

Soon after sighting Mt Taranaki I lost the track. The map showed a clear route through to Kurua Road, and Te Ruke Lodge was just a few kilometres on from that. I'd been told it was easy. I had advice from a National Park man who'd made the trek years before: just follow the main track when you come to the

junctions. The map also showed a high-tension powerline coming through close to the track, I could see that, and felt secure.



But somehow I missed the turn. Maybe I lost the trail about where the Ruapehu District Council sign was uprooted, and a private property sign warned you off. A dispute was obviously underway here, but I went on anyway following a clear route downhill into a gorge.

I descended into shadow and damp, and above me the blue afternoon shrank. Sheep that hadn't seen shears for at least two seasons flounced away in front. The trail was bitten by slips, and one gushing waterfall had washed it out entirely. It wound ever-down, then spilt two ways. I explored both, one dead-ended in a grassy flat surrounded by bush, the other at a broad stream.

I unfolded the map and lined it up by compass. I suspected the watercourse was the Tupapakuroa Stream, two kilometres south of my intended route. I could go back uphill and try again, or I could go forward.

The map showed that if I stuck close to the Tupapakuroa Stream, I would exit onto Kurua Road anyway, about three kilometres downriver. Forward then.

The foundation of Taranaki back-country is the blue siltstone they call papa, and every stream cuts through it like a knife through geological butter. The Tupapakuroa Stream had carved out high narrow gorges, and to stay clear of those dark alleys I took off my boots and crossed and recrossed the stream, climbing away from it finally up a near-vertical bank. Nothing held. Chunks of the steep face skidded away underfoot. I hauled upwards on grass and bracken that came away in my hands. I was getting a first taste of the country that broke the spirit of the WWI ex-servicemen.

The sun was going down. I found a stock trail and broke out the Leki sticks to steady myself on a canter across rough land where fern hid holes and rocks. I came up to one of the Tupapakuroa tributaries. Even that small flow had cut a formidable canyon, and after crossing a stream that was barely a metre wide, I had to claw my way up a soft ravine, sweating and slipping on a muddy face that fell away to a 30-metre drop below.

I made the top. In the distance, the high tension wires swooped across the valley - I wasn't that far off-course and I thought I could see a farm track on the far side. I saw that much, and then darkness fell.

With the night, the bushclad hills seemed visibly to hoist themselves higher around me, and the sound of the watercourse below took on a sharper, less friendly timbre. I sat down and ate three gingernuts. I could camp, or I could keep on. I'd told Te Ruke Lodge people I was coming - if I was staying out, they needed



to know, and I tried the mobile but there was no signal.

Better then to keep on and simply arrive. I dug for the torch and spare batteries, laying everything out in neat lines, then spotlighting each item as I checked it back into the pack, naming it aloud. I was talking, I noted with interest, to myself.

I picked my way down the slopes on a small circle of torchlight, crossed the Tupapakuroa again, hauled upwards through light bush, and found the stock trail. It was churned by hooves into suck mud that closed around every footfall with near-muscular strength or played its mud oyster trick - the water-filled hoofprint that compresses underfoot and squirts a surprising distance up your leg. But mud this deep also indicated a main farm race. The trail would lead me out, and every squashy metre of it was a pleasure.

I broke out onto Turua Road an hour later, sure of my position now, and walked down the road towards Te Ruke Lodge, checking the compass only as an afterthought.

The road was on a north-south axis, Te Ruke Lodge lay south, and the black needle pointed back over my shoulder. A magnetised compass needle is never wrong, and against every instinct, I reversed direction down the road. Things fell into place then. I'd been spun around, disoriented by the night, but I'd come right, and as I approached Te Ruke Lodge finally all the garrulous antibodies of my former anxiety were bubbling in the blood.

It was 9 pm, and a couple of young English women were sitting by the fire. I swung the pack off and sat down.

"Now that," I began, "was hard. I went down into the gorges and got bushed."

"Gosh," one of the English women looked up from a *New Idea* magazine, then went back to her reading.

"Golly, really?" said the second one, then went back to writing her letter home.

They went to bed soon afterward, but it was 1 am before I was ready, scrubbing and drying my boots, basking in the warmth of the fire, drinking tea. When I looked in the mirror before retiring finally, I still had hookgrass seeds hanging from my hair.



Baldy Haitana came up the next morning with his son Piripi, and we went over the next part of the route in detail.

I'd met Paul Haitana months before when planning the trail. DOC in Wanganui had advised me to consult fully with Whanganui River Maori when bringing the trail through, and Paul Haitana, a jet-boat operator on the upper Whanganui had been my first call. He was a pighunter too and knew the trails.

He'd quickly sketched in a route, written the names of private property owners, and as we'd packed up the



maps I had only one question.

"You might like to suggest some more names, Baldy. I've been advised not to take anyone by surprise, and to consult carefully with Whanganui Maori."

"You have consulted," said Haitana.

Now he was back, and a great help. I'd have to do the first two days walking alone, and he listed the farmers I'd need permissions from. The third and fourth days included a river crossing of the Manganui-o-te-Ao near Pipiriki, Maori land crossings, and bush trails. It was a tricky section, and he'd try to arrange a tramping companion.

The first farmer I rang was Brian McAnnalley.

"You're going through to Pipiriki? I hope you know what you're doing," barked the telephone. "You have to stay away from the rivers in this country."

I warmed to him immediately.

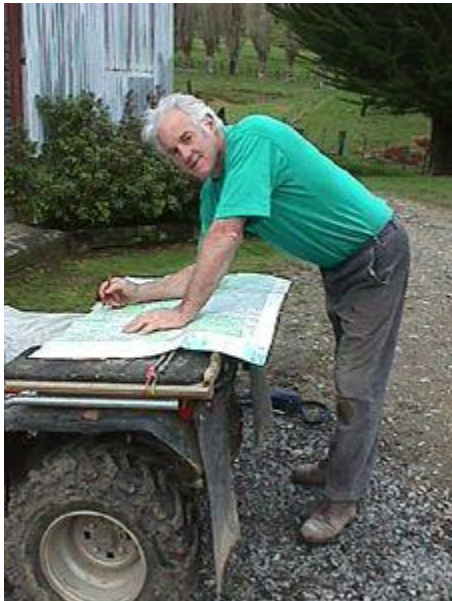
"You jump down a waterfall," shouted McAnnalley, "then you can't get back up."

"That's exactly right," I said.

"Then you come to the next one and you can't climb down. It can take you hours to get out of the gorges, a day to get from one ridge to the next. It's real tiger country. What sort of maps do you have?"

"1:50,000 topos."

"You may need better than that. Call in on the way through and we'll have a look at your route."



I stopped off that afternoon. McAnnalley spread my map onto the back of his quad, examined it closely and shook a sorrowful head.

"These guys," he said, "don't know shit from clay."

He stabbed a finger onto one of the little black squares that represent, in map symbolism, a house or hut.

"See this hut marked here? It's a couple of sheets of corrugated iron lying on the ground."

We went over my pencilled route. It included a paper road up through his own property, leading to an old bridge across the Retaruke River, then a track across the neighbouring farm through to a private

thoroughfare, Erua Road.

I had my pencil out, ready to take notes, but McAnnalley seized it and began to redraw everything.

"No, no, no. The bridge isn't there, it's here. And this trail through to the Siemonek farm - the map shows it on the wrong ridge. It comes off the bridge here -" he was hard at work now with the pencil -" and goes up under that pylon on the hill. I'll show you."

We went to the edge of his farmhouse and peered up towards the pylon. We came back to the map.

"Look at this. They've shown the pylon down by the river." McAnnalley obliterated the offensive symbol with a few swift strokes. "In fact," he said, "the line is suspended across the valley from here -" he pencilled in the new pylons, " - to here."

He stood back. The map still wasn't right.

"This is just hopeless," he said. "Now this bit of trail for instance - it just isn't there. Don't even try. These maps are all taken off aerial photographs. A bulldozer track shows up clearly enough, they've got the photograph of it, but two years later its overgrown, it's gone."

I departed the McAnnalley farm completely unsure of my maps, but deadsure of the route. And he'd promised to speed me along the subsequent leg of the traverse by ringing the next farmer down the line, Don Siemonek.

I got to the Siemonek farm at nightfall, just as Don and his wife Velma arrived back from the Mystery Creek field day outside of Hamilton. Siemonek's son Kevin had taken the phone call from McAnnalley and had written the details of my impending arrival on the Formica table. Since I had now arrived and could make my own explanations, Kevin took a cloth, a chunk of butter, and rubbed it off again.

"That's my white board," said Siemonek mildly. "We're pretty country around here."



Don and Velma had amalgamated four ex-servicemen blocks to get a sustainable farm. They'd begun 20 years before, when no phone lines existed and electricity was erratic. In the early days too he'd swung his fists on the hunters who regarded the area as theirs, and whose dogs, in the worst of a series of bloody orgies, had ripped out the throats of 40 sheep.

"It's still a bush farm," said Siemonek reflectively after we'd all eaten. "They said go west young man, and I did, but sometimes I wonder if I came too far west."

I bedded down at the farm for the night, and a poem in the loo suggested the long struggle.

#### **Don't Quit.**

When things go wrong as things sometimes will  
When the road you've trudged is all uphill  
When the funds are low and the debts are high  
When you want to smile but you have to sigh

When care is pressing you down a bit  
Rest if you must but don't you quit.  
Success is failure turned inside out  
The silver side of the clouds of doubt  
And you never can tell how close you are  
It may be near when it seems afar  
So stick to the fight when you're hardest hit  
It's when things seem worst that you mustn't quit.

Don Siemonek rang through to Geoff Gannon at Makino Station, and I hiked up to the farmhouse by lunchtime next day. Like Siemonek, Gannon was sympathetic to a poled trail through his farm, with one proviso. Trampers would have to advise him when they were coming through. His main stock trail ran alongside the Makino Stream, the gorges fell 80 metres straight down in places, and he'd seen it happen: the flock would be drawing nicely along the trail, then an unexpected stranger would appear in front of the mob, and they'd pour sideways over the abyss. He'd once lost 100 sheep like that - "and that's regarded as self-inflicted. You get no insurance."

I slept rough that night beside the clear waters of Manganui-o-te-Ao River. Later, I'd have to wade this river, and it looked manageable. But when making my report to the Trust months before I'd put in a bit of advice from the locals. "The Manganui-o-te-Ao River," I'd written, "can be dangerous to cross after rain."

That night it rained heavily, and in the morning the Manganui was mud-coloured and running high.

### #35 Pipiriki – Wanganui

*Te Araroa is unwillingly blooded, crosses a river, and seeks enlightenment at Jerusalem*

Water arced from every drainage pipe that stuck out of every hill. The rain was still falling, and, as I walked beside the Manganui-o-te-Ao my mind kept tessellating each pipe I passed, each gushing feeder stream I crossed, into the million pipes and feeders of the Manganui catchment. All of them spouting water and all headed one way - the river of my imagination was pumping.

I had no final arrangement with Baldy Haitana - simply that he'd try to make it, and if he didn't . . . he'd marked up the safest place to cross the river, the position of Smith's Hut where I could dry out on the other side, and the bush route from the hut to Pipiriki. If he didn't arrive I'd have to do it alone.

I arrived at Doug Prince's farm, the agreed rendezvous. Prince himself wasn't home, but his partner, Christine Renata opened up a caravan in the yard. Night fell, and I waited. The rain, at least, had stopped.

I rang home, seeking comfort, and my daughter Polly closed the conversation with a bright observation on the river.

"You be careful now. Death by drowning was the chief cause of accidental death in colonial New Zealand you know."

But Baldy did show, his car lights swinging up the drive. He couldn't do the two-day tramp himself, but he'd brought his 20-year-old son Randal, and two life jackets.

"Yeah, the river," said Baldy just before he left. "It's up a foot, but that's okay. Get yourself a good waddie. Then lock up - one fellow holds onto the other fellow, and doesn't move until his mate has a firm footing. Boots? I usually wear them for a river crossing, but keep them loose."

Randal bedded down in the caravan, tucked a rifle under the mattress, and ran a thumb across his hunting knife.

"Do you have a steel?"

He was a pig-hunter, a casual farm labourer, a rugby player who'd made the King Country under-21 colts. He helped with his father's jet-boat business in summer, but he had plans to go to Australia and work on the drilling rigs.

"I want to see what's out there. See the world instead of looking at it on the box. Like Shortland Street eh. Flash clothes. Cars. You don't see much like that around Pipiriki."

Next day we headed over river bluffs. We hit bush, and the cry that echoed out of the valley below was so like a human call for help that I stopped.

"That's a stinking billie peeling back a nanny," said the hunter. "I like to stalk them, and shoot them in action."

Soon after a goat appeared briefly on the bushline and he fired at it. The animal disappeared at a run,

and it seemed to me the shot had missed. Randal didn't think so.

"I hit him in the neck. It will puss up. It will get as big as. It will get a disease and it will die."



We went on, still high above the river - Te Araroa was being baptised in blood, and I would have liked it to stay clean, but when you come to the country, the pig-hunters are all round you, and the wild goats are a target, shot as food for the pig-dogs, or simply shot as pests.

Randal didn't want goats, he wanted a pig.

He stopped at fresh signs of rooting, and pig sign leading away.

"This was done last night. It's their daily pig track, like a human footpath."

#### **Randal Haitana**

You could feel the change. Randal looked about him, suddenly stealthy.

"You don't ever," I said, "feel bad about the pig?"

"Nah, I just think, choice - got us a pig. And they're getting skilled now. The ones that haven't been dogged before stand and fight. They leave your dogs in a creek all ripped up. They can really pong up your dogs.

"But I do show it a bit of respect. Bury its guts or something like that. Some formal way of saying thank you. I never sell the meat. I catch it for food, or if there's a tangi or an occasion. There's always a reason for killing an animal - even a goat. That's food for a pig, and I mark the spot and I'll come back."

Without dogs, the chance of surprising a pig was small, but Randal glided along the trail now, and within minutes stopped and waved me back. He went down on one knee, and the rifle cracked. Through the trees a black goat lay slumped on the grass, and the hunter moved towards it with his knife, pulled the horned head back and slit its throat. I saw a sheet of blood gush from the animal and Randal returned, wiping the blade.

"You're not offended by this or anything?"

"I'm not a hunter Randal."

"Okay. It was just that look."

The billy-goat began suddenly to run. Down on its side, killed twice over by the bullet and the knife, still the back legs kicked away in unison, the front legs took up the rhythm, and between each ghastly bound,

only an unnatural quivering of each limb marked its end.

After five hours of tramping around bluffs, we descended to the river, put on life jackets, and prepared for the crossing.

A waddie - a pole. We would use a Leki stick apiece. We strapped on the life-jackets, and Randal led out into the river. If I'd been doing it alone, I would have camped and waited, the river was still running dirty and it looked high. We locked up and went out step by step. The water surged up around the handle of my Leki. It tugged away at hip level, but two men felt good, linked arm to arm and each with his pole, a six-legged two-backed beast that sidled with slow and sure feet out into the main channel.

You could feel the point at which the river threatened to take you. Around waist-high in the flow, your boots no longer felt so firmly grounded.

"Personally," I remember thinking, "I wouldn't go on with this." But I left it to the pig-hunter, who'd done plenty of crossings.

Randal turned: "We'll go back - it's too deep."

We edged back, ducked further upriver, and tried again.

This time there were rest-points, smooth rocks that rose above the river surface and provided a back-wash away from the flow where you could catch breath before venturing out again. We crossed, and went up to Smith's Hut.



**Smith's Hut**

We lit the range, and everything was drying nicely. We drank hot sweet coffee on the porch, resting our gaze on the river's pale papa bluffs that rose away sheer just a few hundred metres off, and on the bushline beyond.

Evening was coming on.

"It's times like this," said Randal, "gave Barry Crump his poetry."

"Yeah - look." Cirrus clouds above us had begun to turn orange.

"Peace and quiet."

"Yep. Hear the river?"

"Yeah. You know, if I had a motorbike with mudgrip tires I could ride from Pipiriki right through to here, wheel-stand it across the river and up the other side."

"Okay."

Randal's hand strayed to the gun.



"About now the goats should be coming out. You want to ping a few billies?"

"No."

The goats did come, but I must have been getting to Randal, for he squinted down the telescopic sight, then put the gun up.

"Some things you have to really think about before you pull the trigger eh?"

"There's no reason?"

"No."



Next day we sighted the Whanganui River, and came around to Pipiriki. A stone angel on the outskirts of the settlement served notice that I was entering onto a very Catholic river. Te Araroa's plan suggests canoeing the Whanganui - it's a walking trail, but canoeing is just what you do on this river, and Wai Wiari, the woman who runs Wairua Hikoi tours, loaned me a canoe. I paddled off toward Jerusalem, ten kilometres downstream.

James K Baxter, New Zealand's most precocious poet, was 41 when he had a vision. He'd been beset by trouble.

He prayed to God one night in 1968, and in the morning a single thought lay in his mind, Jerusalem, New Zealand.

Baxter felt either his reason was momentarily unhinged - he thought not, for he felt quite functional - or he'd experienced a minor revelation. He wrote to a friend that he'd been shown a Godhead. It had two faces, one Maori, one pakeha. The Maori face, he saw, was "mangled and hurt by our civilisation". He felt himself ushered to Jerusalem, to learn spoken Maori, to found a community there and to begin the labour of "washing and cleaning" the Maori face.

I sighted the tall steeple of the church, and pulled the canoe ashore. The Sisters of Compassion, an order founded in the 1880s by Suzanne Aubert, once Mother Superior at this Catholic Mission, keep rooms open in the old convent for \$5 a night. I settled in, then walked up a dirt trail.

A corrugated iron fence separated the grave from the villa where Baxter had once run his commune, and where muffled voices still affirmed life. Pilgrims' feet had polished the tree roots that lay across the short final path in, and the grave itself was marked by a chiselled riverstone. A totara tree overhung it, and onion weed drooped on the plot.



### *High Country Weather*

*Alone we are born  
And die alone:  
Yet see the red-gold cirrus  
Over snow-mountain shine.*

*Upon the upland road  
Ride easy, stranger:  
Surrender to the sky  
Your heart of anger.*

Baxter was around 18 when he wrote that, probably his best-known poem. Or, at the same age:

### *The first of many griefs*

*The first of many griefs  
for such as live by pain  
was never love of girls  
but that old men*

*not hardy and not wise  
nor famed by singers;  
whose lives are blacksmith's pride  
or green fingers;*

*for whom mute iron spoke  
and leaf sought sun;  
should under earth fall  
not to be known again.*

Or the poem *Wild Bees*, also from around this time, which describes smoking out a hive from a cabbage tree, and ends:

*Fallen then this city of instinctive wisdom.  
Tragedy is written distinct and small:  
A hive burned on a cool night in summer.*

*But loss is a precious stone to me, a nectar  
Distilled in time, preaching the truth of winter  
To the fallen heart that does not cease to fall.*

Baxter had great talent, and at this time, his alcoholism and conversion to Roman Catholicism lay all in front of him.



I stood before the grave.

Poets go under the *limen* (Gk=threshold). They therefore seek - I am made safe from any charges of woolliness here by the sly simplicity of a tautology - the sublime.

Cathedral Rocks seen on a moonlit midnight from Ruapehu's summit ridge - sublime would be a word for it, "something more deeply interfused" etc -- but that was Wordsworth and the romantics, and we're harder now, more deliberately superficial, happier to rebound off a shining surface.

Yet there's still the threshold where the linear sentence stops and beyond it a reality that yields only to what the American poet, Wallace Stevens, called "ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds". That, is poetry but the sub-threshold exploration can be strange, psychological, genuinely frightening - I've always thought that scene in *Silence of the Lambs*, where Lecter dons infra-red glasses to stalk the rooms of a dark house, wasn't a bad analogy for a poet at work. It would seem entirely possible that a Godhead with a Janus face might show up there.

But the claims go beyond that. Les Murray, perhaps Australia's best poet, believes the poem joins intelligence or rationality with a subconscious dream mentation, and that the third leg, sound and rhythm, adds physical involvement. Together these can envelop you, turn you momentarily inside out.

A poem can even, Murray claims, step off the page, can be embodied and go forth. The Jesus poem. The Hitler poem that required, as bad escaped poems can do, a massive blood sacrifice. Better by far to have the poem in its benign form, within the covers. There it sits. If it's good enough, it may even have radiance - a cast of thought that lights up not just its subject, but other things too.

It's a big claim, but I have known poetry like it.

I went down to my room, lit the fire, and opened a book loaned to me that afternoon by Sister Anna Maria: *The Story of Suzanne Aubert* by Jessie Munro.

I'd stopped at Jerusalem for Baxter, but it was Aubert who held me until the early morning. The book was beautifully researched and written, the Aubert story interwoven with darker and more surprising threads: the fate of the nun who came out from France on the same ship as Aubert and went slowly mad here; the French priest who put in the first Whanganui River flour mills and stymied the progress upriver of the

Protestant Church Missionary Society by challenging its Reverend Richard Taylor to walk through fire.

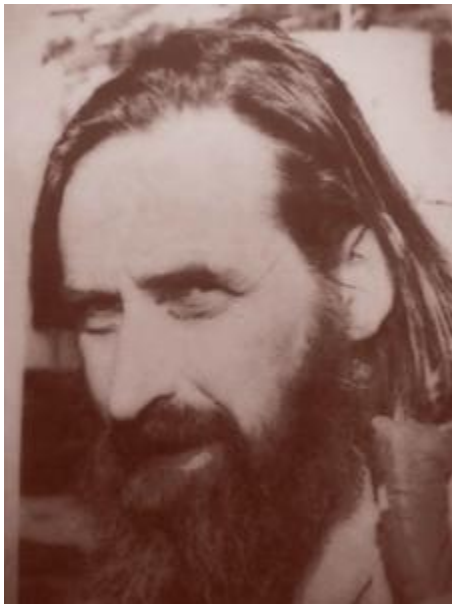
The competition was for Maori souls. Father Jean Lampila did walk through the flames. His Protestant opponent turned away in disgust from such show business, but Maori loved it and Jerusalem, though named by Taylor, went Catholic.

Aubert arrived thirty years after that, in 1883. She had almost supernatural creds, a visionary mentor, the Curé of Ars, Jean Baptiste Vianney, later canonised, who had urged her to New Zealand, and the déjà vu - when she first arrived at Jerusalem, she'd seen before, so she said, the mission buildings.

At Jerusalem she founded the only new Catholic order New Zealand has had, and wrote its constitution: "The sisters have been instituted solely for the Maori and the poor. . ."

It had begun to rain heavily outside, and I was cosy. I ate boiled chestnuts given to me by Wai, but the tree was planted, quite possibly, by Aubert. I was seated where the cross-eyed nun had padded about, the favoured red flannel underskirt (so the book suggested) flashing momentarily under her habit as she knelt to fix this and that. It seemed a rare privilege to read this book in this place, and it posed finally a 1 a.m. question. Why did I respond to the Aubert story, and not to the Baxter one?

The aims of the nun, the poet, were the same - to side with the dispossessed, Maori in particular.



Baxter on the subject, writing in *The Tablet*. "Whenever anybody comes to my door, where I live at Jerusalem, he or she receives a ritual embrace and is offered food and drink and a place to lie down."

Baxter again: God sides with anyone who has no means of redress, or who is poor - "I am thinking of the vast flood of mercy God pours down on a Maori car, battered and stripped of its gears, that rumbles up a hill with 11 passengers and three hitchhikers on board."

No big difference between the nun and the poet then.

### **James K Baxter**

Except Aubert was happy, and Baxter was not.

That Maori car. Aubert wouldn't have stood by and celebrated the thing. She'd have got it to a garage. She was a fixer, organised a distillery and vats to manufacture Maori medicine, marketed it, knew te reo so well her introductory text was reprinted for decades, planted a cherry orchard, walnut trees too, and chestnuts, and sold the produce to steamboat river travellers. She cured ailments and set bones, took aboard waifs, rode and walked far and wide, after the first Catholic church at Jerusalem burned down, to get funds for a new one.

Order.

Baxter talked and sympathised. But in his later life, when you got past all the stated principles of his commune, arohanui etc, the reality was lice, unkempt clothes, squat conditions, marginal food. The Jerusalem commune seemed like just another failed 60s experiment.

Disorder.

And the poetry. Pain, laid out alongside shattered hives and old gardeners seems a fair poetic concern. The later poems have the same pain, but laid out alongside the Catholic symbolism, it seems senseless. Suzanne Aubert didn't feel it, why should Jim? You felt like taking the poet aside: *if you're so devout, what's your problem ?*

Aubert was a Christian and the Virgin Mary, Jesus, son of God, the miracles, the agony of the cross, the resurrection, were all a fait accompli, real, and perfect in their explanations. She had a bible, the brightly painted plaster of Paris icons, the rosary, and the statue of Mary "Je suis l'immaculee conception" in the yard. The spiritual side was looked after, and she could, with confidence, simply get on with the good works.

But Baxter felt the inherent terror of it all. He once wrote to the man who would be his biographer, Frank McKay, about death: "My intellect can accept it . . . My feelings are frozen by it. How can a man stand, without the blanket of creatures, before the holiness of God?"

He felt the terror of it, and sought - I'm guessing of course - the real thing. The state of mind, before they turned into plaster moulds, of religion's front line. And so at the end, he fasted, scourged, accepted poverty and rags, and took the wilder path where there might be - more Sign.

I found a photocopied poem in the convent in Baxter's handwriting and dedicated to one of the nuns. It is titled *The thief who died with Jesus*, and has a stanza, with Baxter's own commentary in the parenthesis

'I cannot turn my head to find out (Christ is hidden  
Who hangs beside me on the other tree;' as we become him)

Baxter the poet stepped off the page at Jerusalem and it was an awesome final gesture, but the problem was, he lost his art and became another man's poem.



**Brent Southern**

It rained all night, and Wai's husband Brent Southern came down to break the news: they didn't want me to canoe out of Jerusalem.

"The river has risen four metres overnight." said Southern. "When it's that high you get whirlpools."

I was disappointed. I'd looked forward to this bit, the tall ferny banks, the river pulling you along with just the odd pry from your paddle to keep your nose straight. The trip down from Pipiriki had been like that, but now the river didn't seem so idyllic.

"There's certain bits of the river where there's almost no bottom," said Southern. "Last year we had to do a



body search - 40-50 feet of rope with grapples, and sometimes the rope hung straight down.

"It's unpredictable. The whirlpools will just appear. Maybe a snag starts it, or an underground stream welling up. They'll turn you the wrong way round very quickly, and they can roll you out of your boat."

Okay - I'd walk. Southen recommended a back-packer stop at Matahiwi, otherwise there wasn't much accommodation over 60 kilometres of river road until you got to a camp ground at Omaka.

"If you have to camp short of those places, be careful. Some of the locals, aren't saints."

"None of us are saints," I said by rote.

"Okay. But some of them have horns."

I walked to Matahiwi, the weather had cleared, and the river had dropped a bit. I tried to get a canoe, but came away only with another bit of advice from a local, Kim Ranginui: "It's the underbubbles on the river that have always scared me. They still scare me. If you get onto the river, watch that."

I walked on another ten kilometres to The Flying Fox. I crossed the river by, you guessed it, an electrically driven flying fox, and talked to John Blythe who, with Annette Main, ran the charmingly foxy alternative-style enterprise on the far bank, brewing their own beer, making their own wine and providing organic foods and stop-over lofts or camp-sites to river travellers.

But they didn't have a canoe either, and I went on.

The road, I had now persuaded myself, was a pleasant walking route anyway, overlooking the river throughout, and with very few cars. But at the Omaka campground, I got onto the river finally. The camp owners, Gill and Lyn Moorhouse, rang the automated river report that operates out of Pipiriki. The river was still 2.5 metres above its usual level, but Lyn stroked his chin, and agreed to lend me a canoe. In fact, he'd come with me.

We paddled away. My eyes were peeled for whirlpools, or the upwelling underbubbles where a canoe loses traction, and I saw both, but writ small. It was a swift ride, but safe enough by then.

We left the river at Pungarehu, just short of where ocean tides slow the river's flow and begin to make paddling difficult. I walked on to Wanganui.





## The North - Section 7: Wanganui - Wellington

### #36 Wanganui - Palmerston North

*Te Araroa sleeps in the belly of the whale, visits a small school, and walks through a rainstorm*



In March 1918 Tahupotiki Wiremu Ratana was camped on the coastline between the Whangaehu and Turakina Rivers. Big west coast waves were rolling in, and they suddenly disgorged two whales on the beach in front of the astonished farmer. One whale died immediately. The other lay thrashing for hours.

Two whales. A vertebra from each would later sit on the concrete gate-posts to Ratana's house. Whale oil from both would later be burned at ceremonies to mark the beginning of perhaps the most powerful Maori religious and political movement this country has seen.

I unrolled my sleeping bag. I'd left the tidy river city of Wanganui only that morning, but this cavernous space was a world away. I climbed into the sleeping bag and lay there. Above me, the ribs. Around me the muffled beat, one per minute, of the thing's great, slow, ticker. I closed my eyes, and went to sleep in the belly of the whale.

Te Araroa's most problematic bit of trail was the forty-odd kilometres from Wanganui to Bulls. It seemed best just to head out, past the Wanganui airport to the coast. It was open, easy walking, with DOC and forestry land providing a way through near the shoreline.

But then you hit the Whangaehu, an acidic river whose source is the crater lake on Ruapehu. Its mouth is too deep and swift to be wadeable.

I didn't have a solution to that. At the end of 1997, when I'd done the Te Araroa report, I'd simply written, since the land south of Wanganui was wall-to-wall farms, that the coastal route seemed best, and the Whangaehu could be crossed somehow - I envisaged a cell-phone call to a local farmer who'd come across by boat.

But I was sure of one thing. The trail should try to go through Ratana Pa, which lay just south of the Whangaehu. You'd have to deviate some six kilometres in from the coast to do it, and cross a couple of farms, but if the trail aimed to include New Zealand's historic sites, along with its most scenic ones,

Ratana Pa should be there.

I stayed at Wanganui a week, writing up material from the National Park-Wanganui section of the trail, and talking also to DOC staff, and the Wanganui Tramping Club about the trail ahead. Could anyone suggest an off-road way to cross the Whangaehu River?

No-one could. No-one knew of farming swingbridges, or of anyone living near the mouth who could ferry me. For the moment it was too hard, so I left Wanganui finally by road, crossed the Whangaehu River on the SH3 roadbridge, then walked into Ratana Pa at night.

Ratana Pa does not reveal itself until you're almost on top of the town. I came over a hill, and the lights lay spread out in the hollow in front. I went on into town. Each house had, not the big settled gardens of suburbia, but a clean functional lawn. Perhaps one house in three had the outside light burning, and that stark illumination of the front wall, uninterrupted by any screen of vegetation, gave the streets a stage-set feel.

Even if you knew nothing of the history of Ratana Pa, it had drama. Shadowy dogs roamed, but beyond that the town was silent and still. The symbol of the crescent moon and star, the marama whetu, recurred, frosted onto the glass of household front doors and if you looked up, it was there again, standing above the houses on the softly-lit towers of Te Temepara - the Ratana temple .

Arepa, Omeka, the beginning and the end. I stood in front of the church. Between the towers, the pediment supported a glowing roundel segmented in red, the sun, and beneath it was the balcony where Ratana once stood to address the crowds. The stained-glass windows glowed from some interior church light.

I strolled across open grassed space to a second building. The church architecture had been stretched sideways here. Te Manuao - the Man of War - had the same twin towers, but set low and wide, a beetling verandah stretched some forty metres between the two towers. At regular intervals along its flat roofline, stood models of the seven founding Maori waka, then the Endeavour, and the Heemskerck.

I stood in front of Te Manuao. A large clock dominated the central pediment

***Ka-chuk-a-chuk.*** The deserted streets, the stillness of the town, made the sudden sound all the more startling. The minute hand of the great clock had risen one notch, and still quivered there.

The silence closed in again, and I waited a full 60 seconds. Above the clock face, in stark black and white lettering was the word Ihoa - God - and below it, in the same lettering, Mangai - the mouthpiece.

The clock notched up another heavy minute of time. ***Ka-chuk-a-chuk.***

March 1918 was a millenarian time. The New Zealand dead in World War One was climbing towards its total, at the November Armistice, of 16,700. And as the war bowed out, the Spanish Lady swept in. Maori turned to their tohunga for protection, but there was none. Only the tangis, for the influenza epidemic was particularly deadly to Maori, killing about one in 25, amongst them several of Ratana's own hapu.

Ratana's aunt, Mere Rikiriki, was a Maori seer who lived at Parewanui Pa, over by the Rangitikei River. She had prophesied in 1912 that someone would soon rise up to lead the Maori people, but no local would have picked Wiremu Ratana as the Messiah. He was aged 45, a hard-drinking man, he smoked, enjoyed parties, some even called him a hell-raiser. But then came the whales, and eight months later, on November 8, the vision. Ratana sat on his verandah that afternoon looking south-west towards the sea. A small cloud appeared there. It sped towards the house, and a voice spoke: "*I have travelled around the*

*world to find the people upon whom I can stand. I have come back to Aotearoa to choose you, the Maori people. . . Cleanse yourself . . . Unite the Maori people, turning them to Jehovah of the thousands."* That evening Ratana saw an angel at the window of his house: *Destroy, it said, the power of the tohungas.*



Ratana began to read the bible. He seemed invested with the power to heal, within his own family circle, then outside of it. He toured New Zealand in 1921, preaching and faith-healing. His reputation grew, and he turned his farmland into a community for morehu, the tribal fragments. His followers pressed for a formal church, and when he came to build it, Ratana reflected on the whales. Te Temepara, the temple. He, or his ministers, preached the gospels there, he was Te Mangai there, the mouthpiece of God.

Ratana saw the spiritual mission as cleanly accomplished, like the whale that had simply crashed and died. But he built also Te Manuao, the Man of War. It housed the movement's political side, where the big conferences met to plan action. It had its religious and messianic symbols, but its processes were necessarily slower, half-sunk in the material world. Te Temepara was centred on the bible. Te Manuao was centred on the Treaty of Waitangi, and Maori grievance. Te Manuao was the second whale, the one that had lain thrashing and in pain on the sands.

The Ratana Church was the new face of the old struggle begun by the King Movement and Pai Marire. It sought to unite all Maori, but less as a pan-tribal movement, and more as a gathering point for Maori under a morehu, or tribal remnant banner. It sought not an independent Maori state, but redress within the Westminster structure. Its political power grew rapidly, and it came to win the four parliamentary Maori seats as a matter of course. In 1935, four years before his death, Ratana sealed an alliance with the Labour Party.

That political leverage perhaps climaxed when Matiu Rata, a Ratana man, and Minister of Maori Affairs in the 1972-75 Labour Government, steered through Parliament legislation establishing the Waitangi Tribunal. From a small and largely powerless start in 1976 the tribunal became a potent forum for asserting Treaty of Waitangi principles, investigating Maori grievance, and recommending compensation.

I found two kids on the street, and asked them if there was a camp-ground at Ratana Pa. They pointed to a nearby corner store. It would open at 7 pm.

Two tinkling brass bells rang as I opened the door. I introduced myself to Naka Taiaroa, who ran the store, and suggested I might pitch a tent down by the park toilets.

Naka brought out a stool and made me a cup of tea. I spent my last \$3 on two pies, and sat down to watch Ratana Pa's main commercial centre pick up speed. People poured into the shop, collecting mail, purchasing provisions, and teenagers milled about inside and outside the shop, buying cans of fizz, selecting their 20c bags of lollies, seeking change to feed the video games, or talking.

Everyone seemed to call Naka uncle, and the atmosphere was family, with a well-practised ritual and no embarrassment when someone's Eftpos cards went through the swipe and failed to locate a credit balance.

"That's declined," Naka would say matter-of-factly.

"Declined!" shouted the delighted shop audience, while the declinee made the appropriate exaggerated gestures of frustration and despair and handed back the can of soft-drink, or began to rifle the wallet for another card.

"Declined!" crowed the chorus outside the shop, noses pressed to the glass.

Then Naka closed the shop. He had a map of the town with the names of every family in a town of 900 written onto the section of land they occupied. He'd rung other church elders, and got agreement. Te Araroa should sleep not down on the wet parkland, but in Te Manuao, which was dry and had toilets and showers.



**Naka Taiaroa**

Naka opened up the building with a complicated set of keys, and switched on the lights. It was huge and cavernous, with red steel girders overhead, and a polished wood floor the size of a basketball court that stretched away to a stage at the far end. A big kitchen stood behind that, and led through to the toilets and showers. Naka laid out a yellow plastic-covered mattress. I could choose where I wanted to sleep, and he left it to me to turn out the lights.

I stretched out on the stage and the regular beat of the clock insinuated itself until the rain drowned every other noise, and I slept, warm and dry inside the whale.

In the morning Naka came across, and I thanked him..

"Well, for what little it was. You came out of the night, my dog barking at you, looking so unwanted, so - out of this world."

"Oh?" I said. It wasn't the image I had of myself, but there you go.

"Yes. But that was deceiving. You came with all the information, and with this report on a walk from Cape Reinga, in the north where many of our people live, to join up with the Manawatu and so on. I think history has been made, and I have talked to the elders, who are amazed."

We left Te Manuao. It had come, by 1998, to the brink of success. The Crown had accepted that the

fishing rights, taken by default, and the illegally alienated land, should be either returned to Maori, or compensation payments made. I made the point to Naka.

"Yes, the things he fought for have finally come to fruition," said Naka. "As it turned out, because of distribution through iwi we have now become isolated so far as the economic benefit is concerned. But we wouldn't have it any other way. It's ironic, but they say God works in mysterious ways. The Maori people would say it's a God sign - e tohu na Ihoa."

We walked back to the store. I asked the shop-owner to swipe my own card through the Eftpos slot, punched in the pin code and waited.

"That's declined," said Naka mildly.

"Fine - okay." I slipped the card back into my wallet. At least the chorus had disappeared. Everyone was at work, at home, or at school.

I walked down to the coast on farmland, crossing the Turakina River on a farm bridge, to reach the little rivermouth settlement of Koitiata around nightfall.. A camping ground stood beside the river, with a couple of caravans that looked inviting for a full-scale storm was coming in, but I had no cash. The only dry place in town was the toilets. I went in and bedded down.

"Get up bro."

I awoke in the morning staring at a pair of boots.

"Come on up to the house and have some breakfast."

Swinging my gaze up: jeans, a studded leather belt, big buckle, a black beanie, a Maori guy leaning at the entrance with his hands in his pockets.

"You get started early," I said.

"Yeah. The toilet isn't working up home, and my little brother came down a while ago. '*Hey - there's someone sleeping in the toilets!*' 'Right - I'll check that out.'"

We drove back to a small crowded bach. The television set was revving high on a game of *Rush - Extreme Racing*, with a couple of dedicated racers punching the playstation buttons. Pat Ngamoki introduced me to the rest of the clan, then began grooming the two kids, Te Aturangi and Te Moana for school, and making a cup of tea and a pot of porridge, building a pile of toast, turning to me between-times.

"If we'd have known, bro, you could have come up here. At least it would have been warmer. We haven't got much, but it'd be better than that."

The kids were giving the Leki sticks a workout.

"Good for spearing eels," said Pat.

We chatted over breakfast. The Ngamoki brothers were East Coast Maori. Pat's last job was planting native trees on the Pokeno motorway extension for Chelsea Landscapes - a good job, he'd liked it, would have wanted to go on, but the work had tailed out. He'd come south to join his brothers where living was

cheap.

Then *Rush* finished, and Pat's other two brothers, Harry and Mauhikitia, wanted my story.

"What's an old man like you doing that for?" said Harry. "It should be us young fellas doing it."

It wasn't the image I had of myself, but there you go.

We talked about route. Pat suggested a forest road through the pines. It began just a few hundred metres away, headed south.

"It goes all the way to Santoft. We know those forests, we take the buggies in, burn up the gas, a bit of hell-raising. The old people don't like it eh."

I wanted to get onto the beach though, and said I'd cut into the forest later and intercept the through road.

"I want to get right across to Bulls by tonight - I've run out of money, and I want to speed up the tramp."

"I've got \$20 you can have," said Patrick.

"No, I wasn't meaning that. I've got food, I've got a tent. I'm okay."

"No, you take it. I'm on the dole, and don't do anything with it but burn gas."

"It's okay, really I don't want to take that."

The brothers put on pressure.

"I've been hitchhiking with nothing in my pocket," said Pat. "Spend my last 50c on bubblegum, crash out in the sticks and wake up still chewing bubble-gum."

"Nothing worse than being on the road and you get to a petrol station and can't buy a coffee," said Harry.

"You can't even buy a pie," said Patrick. "We've been there. We're still there."



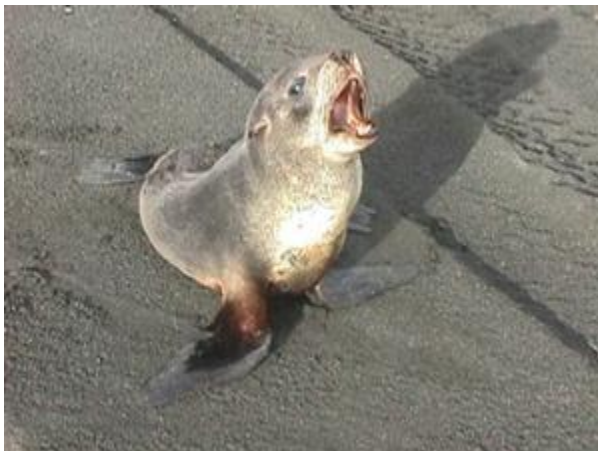


**L to R - The Ngamoki bros - Pat, Mau, Harry**

Before I left, I mentioned the internet site for the first time, and suggested a photo.

"You can put my mask on the internet," said Pat. "Someone might like me."

"Hey," said Harry. "This Maori boy cracked my screen."



I walked away from Koitiata on a clear morning, and out to the south a RNZAF Air Tourer trainer was doing stall turns, loops, barrel rolls. Then a Skyhawk came booming through, low over the water, towards the bombing range further up the coast. The boys, burning up the gas.

I passed a small sealion that warned me off with a show of teeth, then I headed inland through the forest. Around me the sky lowered, and it began, heavily, to rain.

I came up to the isolated Santoft School. I'd never been into a school on my trek, and on impulse I walked in and offered to talk to the kids.

It was a small, single-teacher, hold-in-the-palm-of-your-hand, school, with 11 pupils, exactly the sort of school the Ministry of Education now earmarks for closure. Its logo was three pine trees, and the big annual event was the lamb and calf day.

The kids gathered and I stood at a white board and sketched the North Island. Now then, here came the inky line of Te Araroa, through an historic town here, past a lake there, down a river here, into a cave there, onto a mountain here. I talked for 20 minutes, then it was question time.



"Where do you sleep?" said Todd Spring.

"I unroll a sleeping bag where I need to, then roll it up again in the morning."

"Cool," said Donna Ward. "You don't have to make your bed. You just wake up in the morning and go."

"Have you been attacked?" asked Ammiel Williams.

"No never," I said. "Well, kind of, maybe once."

"Tell us, tell us."

"Well, it's a bit nasty in places."

"We love nasty stuff," said Gabrielle McGinity.

I told them about Mt Manaia. The questions went on.. How many pairs of shoes had I been through? None, I was still wearing the original pair of boots, slightly cracked, but in good shape. What did I eat? Did I cook on fires? When the questions were done, I had one of my own.

"Okay," I said. "You've seen how the trail tries to link up the best bits of history, and the best bits of nature in the North Island. Now tell me, why does the trail come through Santoft?"

That was a serious question - I didn't have a clue why the trail went through Santoft.

"The Fuselier," said Lee immediately.

"Right," I said cautiously. "Can anyone tell me about the Fuselier?"

"It's a big ship that was sailing for England," said Todd. "It's covered by heaps of sand now, but I know where it's buried. There's a stick coming out of the ground. In the war they used it as targets. They got out their big bazookas and used it for practise, and then everything went under the sand."

"Okay," I said. "And what do you guys think about the trail?"

"I'd love to do it," said Gabrielle.

"Meet all the places in history," said Todd.

"It's awesome," said Donna. "After you finish your trip to Wellington, can you come back to Santoft and talk to us again?"

I hung about the school for 30 minutes to dodge a heavy squall. The kids had gone home, and when I set off again, the school mini-bus was coming back towards me. The driver, Lorina Spring, pulled over and leaned out. "The kids have all been talking about you. You must have done a good job. They want to travel all around New Zealand."

There's no such thing as bad weather, they say, only bad gear. I had shearer's overtrousers, bought in Te Kuiti from a stock firm. I had a hooded anorak and a storm cover for the pack. Inside the pack everything was encased in a heavy-duty plastic liner, and inside that the sleeping bag had its own waterproof stuff-bag, which I'd lined with another layer of plastic. I had good gear, but the rain had come in big bursts all day, and as I started down the forest roads, then onto the tarseal for the 16 kilometres into Bulls, it really set in. South Taranaki was deluged with over 15 cm of rain that day, and the Manawatu lay on the edge of the same storm.

Night fell. The boots went soon after. Despite all the beeswax applications, the water came through by capillary creep and they turned sodden. The stiff rain hood dripped water, wind blew it into my face, and no matter how tightly I zipped and Velcroed the collar beneath, trickles of cold water ran down my neck.

And yet - your mind stays absolutely dry. It starts to play. It begins to offer up cute phrases. *Inside every wet man, there's a dry man struggling to stay exactly where he is.* Head down, it picks up whatever detail is to hand - the whitened road-kill remnants run over so many times they've been driven into the tar itself - and makes a playful summary - *Nature, flat in tooth and claw.* Car lights arrowed towards it, and the dry mind sprang happily, in the moment of final dazzling illumination, into the mind of the unknown driver, glimpsing its own image, this dripping black lagoon critter, this Beowulf, while knowing that it was not these things at all, but simply itself, dry, resilient, civilised.

The only thing that broke the mood was the isolated house. Without neighbours to peer in, the isolated house had not drawn its curtains. They were cooking dinner in the isolated house, and the Beowulf drooled. They were sitting on high stools at their open-plan servery between kitchen and dining room, with the television news in the distance, a drink in hand, and the Beowulf could taste red wine.

Forget it. The house in the field looked frail and stupid under this great falling mass of darkness and water anyway. The Beowulf knew this was not his place and passed on by, but felt, on the instant, not playful at all, but jealous, and wet.

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Just outside of Bulls the Tutaenui Stream had burst its banks and the cows were retreating to the high ground. Away to the right you could hear the Rangitikei River roaring like a train. Just as I pulled into town the fire siren went off, and a flashing fire-engine pulled out, but it was to pump flood-water off the highway.

The first shop I saw was the Bullseye Video. The second was painted white with irregular Friesian patches of black, the Dairy Bull. Then a church with the motto, Forgive-a-bull. A doctor's rooms, Treat-a-bull. An antique store - Collect-a-bull.

I went into the Rangitikei Tavern seeking a cheap room. I wanted to dry out. Every head turned:

"You speak English?" demanded a guy standing at the bar.

I ignored him. The barmaid was turning over a fat wad of pink bubblegum in her mouth.

"Do you have any rooms?"

"Blugg-a-blugg-a-bluggy-blug-blug," parodied the mate, determined to turn me into a cultural alien..

"No, try the Criterion down the road," said the barmaid.

"Do you drink?" said the man.

I stared at him a moment, a big guy, half-cut, nasty, and turned to go. He upped the ante -

"Are you a rapist?"

"Shut up Chris," said the barmaid.

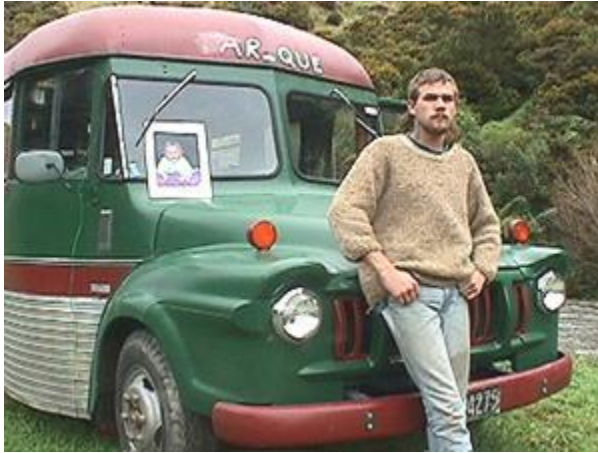
Fight-a-bull. I went down main street to a 24-hour service station. The blue Mobil logo with the red O stood there - if any business in town was a natural to take up the town's motif and emblazon it big, it was this one, but the Rotary chapter at Bulls obviously hadn't persuaded the corporates to join its folksy game. The closest the station got was a sign on the back wall: **Mo-bulls Truckies Coffee Club**, with a cup hung on a hook for each of the long-distance drivers that regularly stopped in here.

I had the Maori \$20. The coffee cost \$1.50. That left \$18.50. The Criterion rooms cost \$30. I went on down SH1 where the sign said Hospit-a-bull - the Bridge Motel. I got a cabin with a heater for \$15, and hung everything out to dry.

Next day I walked the Heritage Trail out of Bulls, stopping to wander through the bush garden at Mt Lees, formerly the home of Labour MP Ormond Wilson who'd gifted the property to the nation in the 1970s. I arrived at Feilding just on nightfall. The Manawatu District Council has a long-term plan to put a walkway down the rail corridor between Feilding and Palmerston North. That then, was the way to go. Night had fallen but I walked on, down 20 km of rail line, a jolting journey across 30,000 sleepers, watching the signal lights in front turn from red to green, and stepping well to the side as the freight trains thundered through. I knocked on the door of a Palmerston North friend at 2 am.

## #37 The Roof Falls In

*Te Araroa enters its own nightmare on the Tokomaru River*



I was asleep on the floor of a J3 Bedford bus, and I dreamed.

I was high up on a corrugated iron rooftop painted bright red. I was climbing along the ridgetop, holding onto the flashing. As I moved, the roof away to my right began to soften and sag.

I felt a surge of confidence in my own strength. I was fit and could deal with it. I swarmed away left, but the roof's peculiar decay was moving faster than I was. The ridgeline began to sag beneath my hand and I began to swing downward on the vinous thing, not knowing if it would hold or break.

I have always treated dreams with utter respect. They are only dreams of course, whose bizarre scenes and situations do not, could not, occur in the waking world.

Except that they do.

I woke up, with the fear slowly draining away. One of last night's visitors to the bus had offered me a little plastic snap bag of Feilding homegrown tobacco. Very mild. They paid only \$35 for a half-kilo of the weed. I restrict my smoking, but not always. I rolled myself a thin cigarette lit it, and lay on my back, watching the smoke drift up to the ceiling. The bus rocked as Corrin Maber got up out the back, dressed, and came through the curtain.

"Breakfast?" he said.

"Sure."

The gas rings popped as he lit them.

"Bacon?"

"Oh yes."

"Two eggs?"

"Uh huh."

"Let's see what else we've got here." He had his head in the cupboard

"Baked beans, spaghetti, corn, ra ra ra, what do you want?."

The breakfast, finally, was huge, with fried onions and sautéed garlic on the side, and toast butter and jam to follow. What Maber did, fixing buses or breakfasts, he did very well.

The previous night I'd walked up from Palmerston North, following the Tiritea Stream then around a 4WD track to connect with Kahuterawa Road. A big rainstorm had hit as I passed Kahuterawa Park and I'd seen the J3 parked there.

I'd once taken my family for seven months around the South Island in an almost identical model. This one had been instant nostalgia, so I'd knocked on the door and the guy with the Megadeath T-shirt and the tats up his neck had invited me in.

Maber kept a baseball bat by his bed. He was man alone out here, but he saw himself as the park guardian. He cleared the gorse down by the river, scrubbed out the toilets, and when the locals came out to slide their cars, he'd stand by his bus and stare them out of there.

Maber had got his Harley Davidson by age 21. He'd traded across to a houstruck because that was what the girlfriend wanted. Then a bus. He made engines sing. He knew cars. He'd had plenty and named them by make, by engine size and by fond lists of their accessories - the mags, the scoops, the spoilers. He was on the dole, but he set goals and carried them through. As we'd compared Bedford housebus layouts, he'd paced about, patting a place here where the wood panelling and pokerwork would go, framing a portal there which would be stained glass.

I finished the enormous breakfast. It was time to go, and I suggested a photo. Maber wanted his 16-months-old daughter Zowi in the shot too, then he walked a couple of kilometres up the road with me and I got Zowi's story. He'd split with the mother - his own fault, and he regretted that - but his daughter would know she had a father. He'd bought her a Torana. It was stored in a secret site. He'd paint it flake blue, put skirts on it, power it up by swapping the Holden 253 engine for a 400 small block Chevy. He had plans to cruise to Auckland with her in the car. When she was 16, he'd gift it to her. By then it would be a classic in mint condition. Zowi was a future highway queen.

I went on up a mountain-biking track that led through to another 4WD access - Scotts Road.

When I'd designed the trail, the route from Palmerston through to Scotts Road had been easy enough, but then it got problematic.

First, I'd suggested, Te Araroa should follow a forestry road that branched off Scotts Road, and headed south about five kilometres.

When the forest road ended, I'd suggested a bushbash of about three kilometres over the mountain flanks. That took you down to the Tokomaru River, but once you hit the river, I'd indicated a riverside trail right through to Shannon.

I'd worked off two maps. DOC's Tararua Parkland map did not show any Tokomaru River trail. A 1984 Lands and Survey map did show it, and even named it - Burton's Track.

DOC is cautious and displays only routes that are in relatively good shape. I suspected Burton's Track was probably going to be rough, but that it would be there. So I drew it into the trail design. .

Now here came Te Araroa down Scotts Road. Step by step with a big breakfast under its belt, a spring in



its stride, and hope in its heart for so far Te Araroa's dream plan had interlocked with reality as neatly as a closing zip...



I found the forest road turnoff, exactly where I'd expected, and I went on past the No Entry sign, and into the pines, pleasant enough, as usual.

Beyond the pine forest stood the 600-metre Mt Kaihinui, and big ridges covered in bush, a little daunting, as always.

The track ended. I stared across the fence at a wall of bush, and on impulse, I did something I hadn't done before on the tramp, scribbled a note, rolled it into a tube and pushed it through a protruding staple on a fencepost: **July 10. Entered here, headed Tokomaru River.**

I broke out the compass, jumped the fence and pushed my way into the bush..

One kilometre in the supplejack was starting to spread its nets, and I was forced off the ridge. I found a stream, and followed it down for an hour. I came to a sharp little escarpment where the stream plunged away in a pretty and impassable waterfall.

The banks either side of me were covered with kiekie.

Kiekie is a tousle-headed native that always sticks close to watercourses. It never grows straight up. The tough, pliable stems are held up from the ground a distance by aerial roots, but they then bend and snake any which way before each white stem rises finally to a burst of long leaves. Climbing uphill against kiekie is like attacking the bank and ditch defence of a pa where the defenders are all pushing harsh green mops in your face. You push past the mopheads, and then the tangle of stems traps and trips you.

I fought through the kiekie for maybe 40 minutes. The bush was starting to darken by the time I was through, and I broke out the Leki sticks for balance, heading fast down slopes of open bush to get back to the stream again.

I could hear the stream. I swung round a tree that stood at the edge of an apparently gentle slope down, the sort of downhill manoeuvre I'd done a thousand times before, swinging down, turning, and going on to the next handhold.

Not this time. I swung round and down, and suddenly I was hanging by one arm. My boots weren't touching the ground. And no way, when I looked over my shoulder, could I just let go and drop. The slope below had a few fragile punga dotted here and there, a light covering of the little pink-stemmed succulent they call pigweed, but otherwise no handholds at all. It was just wet earth with a light covering of greasy shale sloping sharply down to a vertical drop-off into the stream. That edge was in deep shadow, but it

looked like a nasty fall onto rocks.

If I dropped, I'd slide, maybe right over the edge. Okay. A branch extended over the slope, a little below me, and to the right. I swung my legs onto that. I tried to transfer my weight to sit upright there - I couldn't. A supplejack vine had snared the pack.

I grabbed the vine and tried to break it. My own strength in a difficult situation astonished me. I already knew supplejack was unbreakable, but even so, using just one hand, I half-snapped it, and worked at the remainder, reducing it to white fibre. One Leki stick slipped off my wrist as I worked, and slid away below. I hardly noticed, but finally I gave up anyway. I couldn't do it.

I was held at a 45 degree angle across the trunk, above the drop, and there was only one way out. I had to shed the pack.

I slipped the chest harness, then the hip harness, and eased the pack off. I kept hold of it, twisted it free of the vine, but there was then no way of getting it back on. I lowered it slowly to the slope below.

I jumped down to secure it. I was now on top of the slippery slope with no way back up the bank.

I stood there. The night was closing in.

*Cutaway to the glow-worm, Steve?*

*Nope, not yet, let's just crank it up one more notch first. This is where he tries to find the rope.*

I was crouched there, holding onto the branch with one hand, the pack with the other. If I let go, the whole shebang threatened to slide away into the gorge below.

Strangely maybe, I was enjoying myself. I was the hero of my own Steven Spielberg movie. Each difficulty overcome simply led on to the next crisis, but it gave Harrison Ford Chapple his chance to shine.

I knew I could get sufficient traction with two feet and two hands to swarm sideways across the slope. The difficulty was trying to drag the pack across as well.

Ah! Of course! The rope!

I'd tie the pack to the tree, cross the slope, come back round to the tree, haul the pack up on its rope and start again.

I'd carried that rope for months, unused, still shop-sale perfect, a tightly bound yellow hank wedged upright between the fuel bottles in the back pocket of the pack. I steadied the pack with my legs, reached cautiously around, and unzipped the back pocket. The angles were awkward, but I rummaged around inside the pocket. The smooth fuel cylinders. The water filter. The Whisperlite stove, all neatly packed away.

The rope wasn't there!

*Right. Now he's in deep shit. We'll cut away to the glow-worm right here Steve?*

*No, hang on Bo, let's just see if we can squeeze a bit more action.*

I felt for my torch. It was in the zippered top compartment, exactly where it should be. I shone the beam around. A thin, dead punga stump stood below me and I tested its strength with a kick. It snapped, and rolled away downhill. A second punga lay three metres across to the left. It looked stronger.

I had the second Leki still. I stabbed the pole into the earth with such force the rubber mudbasket turned inside out. Leaning sideways on the Leki, I kicked out footholds in the slope, inching the pack along whenever my footing felt secure.

Finally I was close enough. I wedged stones under the pack to keep it stable and lunged.

I got a good grip on the punga. I still had a good grip on the pack. I pulled it slowly across. It started to come, then slid away down.

For a long moment I held there, punga in one hand, pack in the other, outstretched between the two. I tried to haul the pack up. Once. Twice. Each time the pack would be almost there, then my feet would lose grip, and it would slide away again. And each time I tried, the slope got more slippery. It was turning into a mudslide.

I tried a third time, a fourth, I couldn't do it. Finally, I just hung there, panting.

I looked up. The little blue light of a single glow-worm burned in the darkened recess of the bank above me.

I stared at the glow worm. The worm will never know, but I gathered strength from his piquant light for several minutes, and then I exploded into one last God Almighty ball of contracting muscle.

It was Samson pulling down the temple. It was Arnold Swartznegger clinching the biggest Bullworker you've ever seen. It was Te Araroa hauling its pack uphill, higher, higher, until with a flurry of straining arms, wedging feet, kicks, shoves, heaves, it lodged the thing in behind the punga.

Pant. Pant. Pant. Now what's the next thing? It went on for another quarter-hour, but we'll leave those bits on the cutting room floor. I did a controlled slide down the last bit of slope at last to a tree on the edge of the drop-off. From there I picked my way down to the stream, and sat down on a rock. My left arm hurt. A small muscle in my thigh was twitching uncontrollably.

Time for dinner.

I took the pot down to the stream, carried it back to the camp, shone the torch in to check the level, and laughed aloud. The Japanese call it shibui - the absolute charm of something small, pure, and beautiful. Sitting there on the gleaming bottom of an aluminium pot of absolutely clear water, slowly spinning: a small, brown tip of a fern-leaf - New Zealand.

I bedded down. A light rain pattered on the tent.

I lay there, flossing my teeth.

At first light, I broke camp, swapped yesterday's mud-smeared clothes for a new outfit, retrieved the dropped Leki, and got on with the tramp. I reached the Tokomaru River inside ten minutes.



There was no river track.

No track! I sat down and looked at the map.

The distance upriver to Shannon was around 12 kilometres. Twelve kilometres of bush traverse, sideways to the ridges, was a big ask in this country.

I didn't have to go that way. The distance downriver to Tokomaru Road was only about 8 kilometres.

I abandoned my planned route south to Shannon, and turned downriver toward Tokomaru.

I felt fine. I swung through trees. I drank ponded water from old pig wallows straight off the ground. I tramped two hours, and then the Tokomaru took a definite 90 degree turn to the west, and I knew, from studying the map, precisely where I was.

The river spread here, and was easy to ford.

Should I cross? The map showed the far side of the river valley would soon have farmland in behind the bushed tops.

But the bush on the far side looked thicker yet, and the river's edge on my side now had a wide margin of mossy flood-level rock and cutty grass. Rock-hopping that was easier than bush, and I pressed on.

The river entered a gorge, and I was forced back into steep bush..

I couldn't hold a line close to the river. It was just shale there, thickly colonised by the thin, tough trunks of kawakawa, woven through with supplejack, and with a dangerous dropoff. I stayed further in, traversing bigger bush, but the kiekie and supplejack were everywhere, and it began, sporadically, to rain.

It was hard, but the last two hours were the hardest. The river spurs grew steeper yet, and I had to pick my way across a profusion of old and new slip faces.

I sidled across a new slip, looking almost straight down at the brown torrent below.

I pushed across an older, wider, slip face. The big bush had not regrown. What grew instead was all the grassy colonising plants: the densely laced cushions, the myriad small round leaves of pohuehue, the toitoi, the mangemange, the sharp grasses, the thousand dense, tough things that rise out of New Zealand soil when the bush canopy disappears.

I floundered forward, my feet punching into yielding vegetation, getting purchase finally, rising up, toppling

forward, picking myself up from the great mattress of it all, trying to find the earth beneath my feet again.

Then the slip-riven spur just fell away. I peered through the grasses directly at the trunk of a tall tree, but I was looking at the top of the trunk. You couldn't see the drop, but you could feel its presence. I turned inland again, fighting the colonisers.

I came to a grassy cliff. A decayed cliff. The grasses came away in my hand, roots and all. The protruding rocks refused my weight. They dislodged, and bounded away downhill.

But there are always ledges, bits that are less steep, rock that does hold, the odd tough woody shrub to hang onto. I descended slowly into a tight little scree valley, forded a stream that rushed down through shale to the river, and climbed back into bush on the far side. It was 4 pm. I'd have to stop soon, but it was important I covered distance. I climbed the next ridge, untwisting the pack from the supplejack nets, wrenching it through the kiekie. I was down on all fours finally, crawling through a kiekie thicket, seeing light at the end of the tunnel, and I emerged into the light and a vertical face.

I went back, found a half-level slope on the ridge, and pitched camp.

I rearranged my sodden pack, carefully isolating the wet stuff from the dry stuff. I crawled into my sleeping bag. It was only 5.30, but the light had gone. I had fourteen hours of darkness to sleep and plan.

I lay there in the night.

I had a problem, but I wasn't sure how serious it was. Maybe six kilometres to go, it seemed such a trivial distance. I still had food for three days and plenty of fuel. I felt good aside from my left arm. In that first drop, I'd pulled the flexor carpi muscle, the big one just under the elbow. It was starting to stiffen right up, but was still useable. My hands were covered in cuts, and during the day I'd watched the spreading film of bright blood over my wet hands with a sort of fascination, but I'd rubbed antiseptic ointment all over them, like hand cream, and they felt okay. I'd taken a blow across the bridge of the nose, but that was a superficial wound.

The critical thing was going to be the weather, and the right decisions..

I lay there, making plans.

I flossed my teeth...

I awoke in the night to teeming rain. Within minutes the canopy overhead was siphoning the deluge into massive drops that fell on the tent and exploded like tiny mortars.

Lying there in the dark. The trees soughing, the rain detonating on the tent, it was low-level pandemonium. The word is derived from Pan, the woodland god. So, is the word panic.

I had the torch looped on my wrist and I shone it upward. The inside of the fly was shining with a thin film of water. I groped quickly along the length of my sleeping bag. The bottom was wet. The tent wasn't leaking, but the spaces were so tight, and the ground on such a slope that my legs had spilled outside the ground sheet while I was asleep.

I propped the sodden pack against my sleeping bag to stop myself rolling and went back to sleep.

I broke camp early, and set off through sopping bush.

I'd decided during the night to bypass all the precipitous little river spurs. I'd go straight uphill, just climb to a big ridge, then follow the ridgeline west.

I battled uphill, my feet sliding on greasy slopes, the supplejack entangling my feet, my pack, my arms. Even, when I'd finally tumbled through a difficult supplejack net, it would reach back, pluck my cap from my head and drop it a couple of metres behind me. *Take your cap off when you're addressing your superiors, sonny.*

After 45 minutes, I knew I wasn't going to make it up. The thickets just went on and on.

I turned around. It took me half an hour to come back downhill and to stand again on the flattened humus of last night's campsite.

The mudslide drama had been full of quick decision making, quick solutions, it'd been fun. This was a more slow-moving obtuse difficulty. It was also, I knew, far more dangerous. The weather was teetering. I had wet weather gear, but I was getting very damp underneath it, and if the winds really got up as they do in deep valleys, the wind-chill could be deadly. What should I do now?

I went back to the scree valley I'd passed through yesterday. It was full of grass clumps but almost clear of big bush.

It was a thinking spot. Here, clear of the bush canopy I could spot the lie of the land..

Here - it struck me for the first time as a possibility - any chopper moseying up the valley might see me.

I put up the tent, and emptied everything out of the pack. I sheathed the bright yellow pack-liner onto an overhanging tree, a ground to air marker.

I hung my wet gear out to dry, though the winter sun didn't reach this side of the valley, and some of my gear - the Chinese jacket for one, with its down gathered in sodden lumps - was beyond redemption.

I climbed the scree until I could see more of the river valley. Fold on fold, the big bush-covered ridges stretched into the distance. I could see the river winding through below in its narrow crevice.

The hills on the far side were huge. Great flanks, big, impassable. I climbed higher - what is that!

Just poking over the highest ridge on the far side: treetops that weren't bush. .

Pines!

I climbed higher. One ridge along from the pines, a small green moon rose above the bushline.

Farmland!

I had a way out, but it meant crossing the river.

I went down to the river.



It looked menacing. I was in a gorge, and the river swirled through. It was brown, and I could see no bottom. The river was maybe 15 metres wide, but over on the other side, stood a big boulder, without handhold, and the river pushed wickedly against it. I knew if I went in here, I'd be swept.

Swept where? The bush hid any sight of what was round the corner. I didn't like it.

I went back to the camp to cook a meal. For the first time on the journey, the Whisperlite wouldn't fire. I didn't like that, it seemed a bad sign. I picked the thing up and shook it. The white-spirit fuel had left a thin layer of carbon clinging to the metal cup under the gas jet, and a thin sheet of the black render peeled off and hung by a corner, flapping.

I cleaned the jet, got the stove going again, ate, and zipped up the tent as the light faded.

I lay awake a long time.

The only way out was up the ridges on the far side of the river, therefore:.

1. I had to cross the river
2. I couldn't do it in the gorge.
3. I should go back to the cross-point I'd seen on my second day, then work my way back and up to the ridgeline that led to the pines.
4. That would take, at best, another two days
5. I could do it twice as fast if I abandoned my pack.
6. I could even go across the gorge if I abandoned my pack.
7. Don't abandon the pack. That is manifest panic. It will sabotage completion of Te Araroa. And without it, if you get stranded by injury, you'll die.

I was happy with the plan. I had the food and gear to do it. I lay awake, and the rain began again. I talked quietly with my wife. *I know you're worried babe, but I'm okay. Don't send in the cavalry. They'll search the wrong place anyway because I abandoned my plan to go to Shannon. I'm okay. I'm okay.*

I lay there flossing my teeth. I slept.

I awoke at 10 pm. An up-valley wind was beating at the pack-liner. *Whap, whap, whap* - a nasty, insistent flapping. The rain began again, and the night thoughts came on.

That thin sheet of render peeling away from the warming cup on the Whisperlite - it had hung there, purely black, flapping like a cloak. Dr D, still small, had entered the camp.

*Whap, whap, whap.*

That *Dominion* front-page photo from 20 years ago. Six boot-splashing men carry a stretcher down a rushing Taranaki river. The bush overhangs them, the mist is down, the men balance themselves with outflung arms but are tilted inward anyway, by the weight. Their faces are fixed, for they are carrying a body out, and no-one likes dead bodies. They have no aura, no warmth. The hostile universe has closed up right around them, it has gone deeper yet. The universe is inside their skin.

I kept checking my own body warmth. I wondered what it is exactly that keeps us warm, and alive. I thought of myself dead. A corpse with perfect teeth.

I fell asleep again and dreamed. I saw black water rub against vertical stone. I saw every swirl, every

bubble and frothy eddy. I saw an AA sign standing up from ponded water. The background was dark, as if the scene was taken by a flash camera. The sign was pointing out across black water.

I woke again at 3 am. I unzipped the tent, and could see a few stars, but a huge cloud was rising in the west. I lay there, and for the first time on my journey I felt fear.

It was a solid thing, like a short piece of timber lodged under the rib cage.

I talked then, to my three kids. One by one I held them in mind and told them I loved them. I talked to my wife, and told her I loved her. I wanted to get back, I couldn't, and I suddenly wanted all this to stop. The message changed. *Babe, you can send in the cavalry. That would be good. That would be just wonderful.* The amplified thud coming up the valley. The big beating bird hovering above me at first light. The winch rope. The lowered helmeted figure with its extended hand.

The disgrace - some senior sergeant given his opportunity then to bang on about the lack of a detailed route plan, the lack of firm lockoff deadlines for my arrival in Shannon. It would all be true. I'd told a few people in Palmerston North I'd get to Shannon in two days. But departing Palmerston, I'd done no more than leave a message on my wife's answerphone that I was headed for Shannon. No estimate of time. No firm message that I'd ring as soon as I hit town. Disgrace - but who cares? I'd be alive.

I thought of taking a picture of myself on the digital, but rejected the idea. It seemed, in the possible circumstances of its showing, too sad.



In the morning I did photograph the camp set-up, a pre-dawn shot, for I was keen to get moving. I was headed back to that ford on the river. I packed up, jumped the stream and edged my way up the same grass cliff I'd come down two days before.

Back to the top. Back into the mass of vegetation, half-pushing, half-tumbling through with that goddam great pack twisting, pulling me off-balance, getting snagged - *No!* I didn't want to go on like that. Another two days of it. Didn't want to, and quite possibly couldn't.

I went back and stood on the clifftop.

A plane flew low not too far away, and I grabbed at the survival blanket looped over my chest restraint, ready to shake out the foil into a bright signal. It didn't even come close.

I stood there. I knew my options had shrunk right down now, but I found the situation amusing. No way in the world, given the choice to wind back time to Scotts Road, would I have chosen to go into the forest

again. I'd have taken the easy option, gone on by road to Tokomaru and Shannon.

Yet here I was, and the weird thing was - *I liked it.*

I knew I'd been calling this in for months, pushing Te Araroa out to the margins, and now it had happened. It had all been my own call, and it was up to me to find the way through.

The sun had come out on the hills across the river..

I could see for miles. The pines way up to the left. The little planetary hump of green grass. It really wasn't that hard, except for taking my pack across the gorge..

*Abandon your pack.*

*Cross the river in the gorge.*

*Make a run for it, now, while the weather holds.*

I went back down the cliff.

I was moving fast now. I didn't want to think. Didn't want anything to interfere with the impulse.

I got back to the campsite, pulled everything out of the pack and made two piles. I'd take one with me, sealed in a plastic bag, the other I'd seal inside the pack and leave behind.

Into the plastic bag went one change of clothes, one pasta snack, one survival blanket. I paused briefly on the electronic gear. The Nokia? The Mavica? I decided to take the digital, but that was all.

I bound the top of the bag, and made a rope harness. I took off my boots, and put on a pair of rubber sandals with Velcro straps - easier to kick off in the river. I blew up the Thermarest.

## #38 Tararua Tramping

*Te Araroa ventures into New Zealand's oldest tramping ground, and has to call in a rescue chopper.*

Te Araroa Trust's trail blueprint outlined two alternative trails between Shannon and Otaki.

One through route was on the existing Tararua trails, which began at Shannon.

The Tararua Range was New Zealand's first Forest Park, and is the oldest tramping ground in the country. By reputation it's a beautiful, but also a potentially dangerous place. Storms sweep the Tararua tops on average 200 days a year and over 40 hunters and trampers have perished there this century.

We'd therefore proposed also developing a less rigorous, all-weather route to run parallel, but lower, and further west of the Tararuas, along the Arapaepae Range.

That trail plan wasn't plucked from thin air. We'd studied the New Zealand Walkway Commission archives, and the Commission's Wellington District Committee had once proposed just such a trail, as part of a north-south walkway. A trumper going south on this route was above, but never far from, the three Horowhenua towns, Shannon, then Levin, then Otaki. A trumper would need to pack no more than a day or two's food, unlike the four and five day supplies needed for the Tararuas, and could drop down to safety if the weather disintegrated.



So far as we knew, that trail was just a paper plan, but I found, after walking into Shannon, that an offshoot group of the Levin-Waiopahu Tramping Club was marking up just such a low through-route to Levin.

Okay - I'd test it. I walked a few kilometres up the road from Shannon to the Mangahao hydroelectric dam, branched off onto Mangaore Road there, and walked onto farm, into pine forest, out onto farm again. The trail was a relatively safe and scenic route, and within four hours I was through to the hills overlooking Levin and Lake Horowhenua.

Yet my gaze strayed constantly east where even on this blue day the higher hills were pulling the cloud down. Now and again, here and there, the cloud parted and a bolt of sunlight struck a sub-alpine summit.

I hit Levin, and with a few more farming permissions I could have continued on the foothills route right through to Otaki.

But when you got down to it, you couldn't ignore the long tramping history of that interior range, nor the tug of its sub-alpine tops. You couldn't just admire the Tararuas from afar. You had, finally, to go there.



You could pick the Tararua trampers the moment you rolled out the maps. The maps practically rippled into life under their stern attention. They traced the ridges with their fingers, and the names sparked on their lips - Girdlestone, Mitre, Broken Axe Pinnacles, Mt Hector, the Dress Circle.

Take Kevin Penberthy, from the International Pacific College at Palmerston North.

"Now," he said, head down over the map, rubbing his hands, "you want challenges?"

"I don't want challenges Kevin," I said. "I just want to get through."

But he was hardly listening.

"The leaves of the leatherwood either side of the track can freeze solid at this time of year," said Kevin with happy nostalgia, "and you have to hack your way through."

Okay - I was happy to have all the hazards of my proposed four-day tramp through the Tararuas outlined, but I also wanted a tramping companion. It wasn't going to be Kevin, who'd busted his ankle so badly in the mountains he was having trouble right then even walking.

I rang Tararua trampers by the dozen, but the older ones, who had the time, were scared off by the winter rigour, and the younger ones couldn't take the time off work. All I got was the catalogue of hazards - streams that turned into nasty torrents after a fresh, mists that cut visibility, winds that could pick you off your feet, and, particularly in this northern entrance to the range, warnings of a confusing topology.

"Signs? Maybe you'll find a small cairn to mark a turnoff, but you won't find signs," said Dave Ditford of the Levin-Waiopahu Tramping Club.

"DOC has tried putting up signs, but the Wellington hard core uproots them. There's people who believe you should be able to navigate through the mountains, or you shouldn't be there."

Ditford was a busy knitwear executive in Levin. He couldn't afford the time. He suggested Maria Clement.

Maria's dining room was hung with her photographs of the Tararuas - the memorial cross on Mt Hector rimed with ice, the green goblin forest trunks colonnading the mist.

I shook open the map, and the Tararua trumper fell into the usual trance.

"I realise winter is the worst possible time to go into these mountains..." I began, in apology.

"Oh no, it's the best time," said Maria, looking up briefly, eyes alight "We build snow caves up there, fly camp under the stars, cook on an open fire..."

She laid out a photo montage of the main divide.

"This is what you'll see, standing on Pukematawai. It's the main range. Butcher Knob here, a bush stretch through to Puketoro and Kelleher, Mt Crawford away at the back there."

"Why don't you come?"

"Honestly, I've got a heap of work on."

We went back to the map. She was my last chance and I was exerting the same pressure a dog does when it wants to haul you for its nightly trot around the block. Sheer mental insistence boiling away.

"I'd love to do it," said Maria finally, "but I'm on a two-week fencing contract with the Horowhenua District Council. I've just got to complete."

"Look, you must do it," I said. "You're the right one."

"Even if I didn't finish the fencing, it'd at least have to be stock-proof before I could take time out," she said. "Five days work maybe."

"Okay. I'll wait until you're ready."

"Usually I'd time a tramp to go in just after a southerly blow," she warned. "You get clear days then. The weather is okay right now, but if we just name a day and go, the weather may have chucked it in."

"Let's just take that risk."

I stayed five days in Levin, walking up to where the bush trail began, to ensure my own North Island hike remained continuous, but the rest of the time with my feet up. The August days were fine and clear, and then as departure date approached I watched the weather disintegrate. The TV weather graphs showed low pressure systems as densely wrinkled and slow-moving as a group of browsing pachyderms. Trains howled past in the night just 10 metres from my motel unit. Their big lights strobed across the room, and the concrete block walls shook. It rained and rained.

On the first day in, it was raining still, bush-heavy drops splattering onto Waiopehu Hut's ramshackle roof. Night had fallen, Maria had built a roaring blaze, and we hung over the warmth of it, awaiting a rendezvous with the third member of our party.

"Tell me," I said, "how you came to tramp the Tararuas."



"I can remember as a three-year-old standing in the yard and looking up to the snow behind Levin. My grandfather was with me and I looked up at him. I said: *Take me there.*

"Yeah," said Maria, staring at the fire. "It's always been there."

Following the traditional pattern of the tramping clubs, she'd had an older mentor who'd taken her through. Now she was a member of Horowhenua Mountain Rescue and ran her own Tararua guiding company, Back to Basics. It struck me that anyone who could coax fire from wet wood using only snipped pieces of inner tube as fire starters had earned the right to call her company Back to Basics.

The door of Waiopēhu Hut crashed open. A dripping, headlamped Steve Purchase came in and swung his pack down. Steve had worked extra hours on his truck run to get time off, and we were expecting him, but I hadn't expected Ziggy. The black half-Labrador, half-Rottweiler cross, padded into the hut carrying her own panniers of dog biscuits. Steve removed the harness and Ziggy snuggled down by the fire to warm herself. She was sopping wet, and when she got up again she was walking on three legs. Everyone joshed the animal about putting on a Hollywood.

Next morning the hut floor was a lake of water that had come under the door, and the cloud outside was brushing through the trees.

"My God," I said as we tramped out, "this bush is so dark."

The Tararuas had been the shining edge of the world for Maria, the child. I had the feeling it still was. She was not about to let such treasonable comment pass.

She stopped and held first me, then the dull horizon with a steady gaze.

"Hmmmnnnn. I'd say the weather is brightening from the east."

"That would make you, " I said, "a raging optimist."

"Yeah, well everyone gives me shit about that," said Maria, "but in this place you've got to be, otherwise it would be all gloom and doom."

A little later as we broke out of the bush, she pointed to the sky.

"Look there's a patch of blue sky up there - almost."

I tried hard. I couldn't see the blue patch.

We were tramping east, headed deeper into the range, and higher. We passed the hewn wooden cross that marked the grave of Ralph Wood, a Manawatu Tramping Club member who had perished here, literally crawling on the exposed mountainside, in a 1936 storm. The same hurricane had knocked down whole ridgelines of bush. It blocked the tracks so they couldn't get Wood's body out, and they'd buried him where he lay.

Something was wrong. I didn't know what it was, only that Steve seemed tense. We were considering a shortcut across the Otaki River and we needed to know what the weather was doing. That meant getting a forecast. Every time we hit a ridge, Steve rang on his mobile, and a Telecom operator informed him that he couldn't access the weather number on his mobile without a special credit permission to dial 0900

numbers.

It was an astonishingly stupid argument. Steve had a landline account with Telecom, and given the nature of the Tararuas, a swift agreement to give access to a known customer might have seemed a simple thing, but the operator required him to ring back and back, the mobile battery ran steadily down, and we still couldn't get access.

I put the strain in the air down to that, but there was something I'd missed. Ziggy lay down in a puddle, panting, and Steve stood over her.

"That dog is in real pain," he said.

We kept pace with Ziggy from then. Steve took the dog's pack and we limped on to Te Matawai hut. I gave the dog a Voltaren anti-inflammatory tablet, but she was desperately miserable. No-one quite said it, but the trip seemed to be in jeopardy, and the mood was sombre.



"I don't know what it'd be like if I couldn't take her tramping," said Steve. "She's always been a very energetic dog, she's been on some very long tramps with me, and she's inspirational."

He bent down to the dog and rubbed her ears. "Look. She's a member of our party and you'd treat her the same as you would any other member of the party. You can't expect any more from a dog than from a person, and if a person was suffering as much as she was suffering today, you wouldn't ask them to go on."

He went outside, and through the window I saw him pace about to get reception as he made calls on the mobile.

Evening began to fall, and only Maria, the optimist, stayed on patrol.

"Hey! Hey! The tops are clear! Geoff!" she yelled from outside the hut.

I grabbed my camera and raced through the door. My boots slid away and I sailed straight off the edge of the slimy verandah, landed backfirst on the steps, and rolled off, with a groan, onto the frozen ground below.

I got slowly to my feet. I stood there like one of those comedians faking a passionate embrace, my arms wrapped around myself, fingers rippling up and down my back to see just what broken bits of shoulder blade might be sticking out there.

Stood there staring. Maria was right. The mists had drained into the valleys, and the tops were clear. A full moon rose slowly behind Pukematawai. The Tararuas were making their first dark show of magnificence, but laced, as was proper no doubt, with pain.



The next day dawned clear, and at 8am you could hear the beat of the approaching rescue chopper. The pilot, Brendan Cahill, put the machine down on the landing zone above Te Matawai. He'd brought a chaperone, Andrea Swan, and we loaded Ziggy aboard and waved her farewell. The dog would later undergo an operation for a ruptured tendon.

And then it was a fresh start. Up on the first major summit, Pukematawai, the wind had shifted out of the wet and stormy north-west, and a chilly southeast breeze was shuffling lighter, intermittent clouds across, opening the mountains to deep and distant views.

"That's Waiopehu, we came over yesterday," said Steve pointing west. "Twin Peak, Richards Knob, Butcher Saddle on the Dora track..."

Every yellow summit, every tawny ridge, had a name. Every shaggy spur was a potential route to these two.

Maria pointed. "We would have dropped down that spur there, just off Butcher's to cross the Otaki yesterday if Ziggy hadn't gone lame," she said. "We'd have fly-camped down-river."

"Then headed up to Dracophyllum," said Steve.

Ah, the names, the names. I'd heard the litany before, recited over the 1:50,000 maps. Up here I was getting it again. My companions were at play now upon the biggest map of them all, scale 1:1, and I just stood there and let it all expand in front of me. The main range stretched away as a single rugged rollercoaster ridge in front, and all around me was the great geological heave of the Tararuas.

We set off south across rock and tussock. We made good time, pulled up at Dracophyllum Bivouac for lunch, fingered a wrecked helicopter rotor blade there, then pressed on through goblin forest. The wind was swinging further and further south, driving a fine snow through shafts of afternoon sun.

Maria and Steve kept dropping mind-expanding bits of detail as we tramped on. The bush-bashing routes from ridge to ridge. The remembered storms that had trapped you in the huts. The rescues and dramas that seemed to overtake anyone who came often enough into these hills. Maria's husband for one.

"That's where Colin was coming across from Dracophyllum," she said pointing across into pure wilderness. "He dropped down into the Park River then up that spur onto Carkeek Ridge, and he ran out of fuel. He was just going for it, seeing the end in sight - Carkeek Hut. He should have stopped and eaten, but he's stubborn. He's a hunter. He crashed out totally - just a big heap on the ground."



We pushed through summit tracks where the serrated leaves of the leatherwood yielded stiffly to our passage. Unfrozen leatherwood leaves, but the wind and cold were steadily building, and Nichols hut looked very good at the end of the day.

It was Maria's birthday. We stoked the fire with green leatherwood. We lit a candle and sang a rousing happy birthday. We made a special jelly - I mean, how often do you get both the pineapple and the lime flavours mixed together in an aluminium pot? - and put it outside to set. That took just half an hour.

The night temperature had plunged to five degrees below zero, and the snow was blowing in on the back of the southerly. Maria and Steve exchanged glances. A strong southerly is the most dangerous Tararua wind, and can trap trampers in the huts for days.

But we got lucky. A southerly also brings in its train the Tararua's most pellucid days. In the morning, the weather was still and the sky vividly blue. We were on the shining edge of the world.



"That's Kahiwiroa then Aokaparangi, and then the Tararua Peaks - there's a chain ladder up the side of those" said Steve as the dawn light touched the tops. Then, as usual, the two friends began the more arcane discussion of their 1:1 map.

"And that looks like the back of Shingle Slip Knob is it?"

"Yeah. With the crashed de Havilland Devon."

"And the fliers' graves. Is that Angle Knob?"

We followed the ridge south and steeply upward to Mt Crawford, sited almost dead-centre of the Tararuas and at 1462 metres the highest point of our tramp. The view had now opened right out, and Wellington shimmered in the distance, a fabled city hung between blue sea and sky. The white spade shape of Tapuaenuku, the great peak of the Inland Kaikouras, reared behind it.



We gathered leatherwood from the snow-bound slopes, and boiled a billy on the summit. Maria supervised the construction of a windbreak, using my Leki sticks and her big silver survival blanket, and we sat out of the wind, drinking coffee in the sun, absorbing views that now stretched forever.

Then we left, down past a frozen tarn to Junction Knob. At that moment we were turning to leave the tops, and the three of us stood there quiet for a long time. The main range stretched away south still like some vast animal tunneling toward Wellington under a khaki sheet. It stretched away lazily, invitingly, tawnily, with the small specks of the tramping huts, high up on its flanks, glinting in the afternoon sun.

"It seems a shame to leave it," said Steve.

"We could fly-camp," said Maria. "It'll be a clear night. The whole range will be moonlit. "

We didn't. Steve was what the Tararua fraternity call a hisser. Timings, and the speed of the tramp mattered. He liked the bush, and the scenery, but he also liked to get places, and wanted to keep moving.

And me? I wanted to keep going, but I suggested to Maria if she really wanted to camp, I'd stay out.

"No, it is better to head for the hut. It's just - when I get to the tops I hate to leave it."

We headed down into the bush and Waitewaewae Hut, then out the next day, crossing the Otaki on a long swing-bridge, and walking finally across grassy river terraces to the trail's end.

One last gap in the foothills opened up as we came, and beyond, another bolt of sunlight lit some anonymous Tararua top.

Maria and Steve stopped suddenly. The great 1:1 map had now become frustratingly crumpled at its margins, they couldn't quite see enough, and the two veterans argued amongst themselves.

"That's McIntosh."

"Or Vosseler, Vosseler I think."

"Well look, that's Shoulder Knob up there," said Steve.

"No that's Shoulder Knob. And that must be Pakihore Ridge. It's quite flat where it hits the top."

Back in the carpark, while we waited for our ride, the Tararua friends pulled out the map and worried away at the same problem.

"Yeah, I don't think it was McIntosh," said Maria. "Pakihore hits McIntosh closer to the Peaks, and the ridge is on the southern side."

"We should have taken a compass bearing, " said Steve, not quite ready to concede, and then in a moment they diverted away, their fingers jabbing here and there onto the 1:50,000.

"Hey, I wonder what it'd be like," said Steve, tracing the route, "dropping into the Waiotauru River from Kapakapanui."

He looked up at me and grinned.

"Don't worry. It's just carpark fever. I'm not interested in doing the tramping things down south that everyone does, or the overseas circuits - you can spend a whole lifetime just exploring this range."

"It's why I've lived in Levin all my life," said Maria. "People say I'm crazy, but it's all here - the Tararuas, on your doorstep."



## #39 Home Free

*Te Araroa meets the media, then the Wellington mayor, ends its North Island walk and rolls up its sleeves to begin the trail anew.*

I wanted a good clean finish, but clean finishes don't just happen.

You gotta plan.

I was now less than a week out of Wellington: whose hand would I shake, and what media could I make?

I'd kept a low profile throughout the walk. Any news organisation that actually made inquiries, fine, but I hadn't gone out of my way for them. I was writing stories on the trail myself, and I wanted, so far as possible, to be anonymous.

But there'd always been two sides to the trip. The first was personal adventure. The second was the route itself. Te Araroa Trust had planned the trail, and begun to set it in place by negotiation with local authorities, iwi, and landowners, but if it was going to stick, we needed money and we were bidding for funding from the Millennium Commission.

Public knowledge and support would be important in that process. Okay, I'd write an article for the *Dominion*, to coincide with my arrival in Wellington. I wrote it fast, and e-mailed it off with two Tararua pictures. I phoned the features editor, Frank Haden, to make sure the pictures were what he wanted.

"The one of the chopper is okay," said Haden.

"Okay, fine. I thought the dog mightn't show up clearly."

"The what? There's a *dog* in it?"

"A black dog. That's the point of the picture Frank, the dog is being rescued."

"Well we can't use that picture. You can't even see the dog. You needed to use fill-in flash."

"Well, what about the mountain pic?"

"Why didn't you use fill-in flash for Chrissake?"

"I never claimed to be a professional Frank. What about the mountain picture?"

"It's just bloody mountains, there's nothing else in it. You've got to have *things* in your pictures."

That was a shock. It just hadn't occurred to me that my favourite Tararua shot, with the dawn light just touching the tops, might not be enough.

"It's called landscape Frank," I said, but he was insistent, and we settled for a shot of myself on Mt Crawford. I wasn't happy though. Slouching toward Wellington, had they but known, was a creature with whole weather patterns hanging on its shoulders. Its great solemn mind had encompassed so many valleys, had penetrated so much interminable bush, had listened so long to the rote crashing of coastlines and the soundless flow of big rivers, gazed with such intensity by day across the vast low patterns of

agriculture and by night at the loom of big-city light behind the hills, absorbed so much history and flushed so many people, bright as pheasants, from the hollows that it did not, in its own mind, look a bit like the grinning twit on top of Mt Crawford.

It struck me right then, that my euphoric walk-induced mindlessness had gone on so long, I might be badly out of step with the city.

I went along the Mangaone walkway, and through to Waikanae. My wife joined me there, and we went down the Waikanae River bank, crossed a footbridge near the river mouth, then onto the beach.

Euphoria, it was back again. The wind blew strongly from the north, and the two of us simply held the corners of our anoraks and para-sailed past Kapiti Island, down the coast.

We got to Queen Elizabeth Park and cut across State Highway 1 onto Whareroa Farm, a Landcorp property where you can access - by permission at the moment, but with a walkway projected - the Wellington Regional Council's Akatarawa Forest.

From there to Battle Hill, and then to Pauatahanui, and through Whitby to Porirua. I was within striking distance of Wellington, and I waited.

Television One called me up. They wanted shots of me walking in bush, and walking Raumati Beach. I'd vowed before starting the walk not to deviate in any way for television - television's relegations, its arrogance. Bugger that.

But to give television its due, a keen trumper called Garth Bray on the Auckland newsdesk had followed the trip on the Internet. Bray had tried to organise live footage as we came out of the Tararuas, and the arrangement had failed only because the mobile links went down.



I had the time now. I went back to Otaki Forks with cameraman Pat Murray. I burst around the same bush corner six times, Lekis working away like the forelegs of some Daliesque monster. My boot splashed through the same puddle six times.

I strode and restrode down 100 metres of Raumati Beach. I strode and stopped, strode and stopped, and when I stopped I would turn and gaze at Kapiti while the camera closed on my face, then panned out and away to a wide shot of the island.

Then we did the interview:

Television One's Penny Deans back-pedalled in front of me down the beach.

"Why are you doing this?" she said.

My mind was a blank.

"Hmnnnn" I said after a long moment trudging towards the lens with my mouth agape. "Could we do that again?"

From Porirua, Te Araroa's route followed the existing walkway up to Conical Hill, and connected with Wellington City Council's projected Skyline Trail. Skyline followed a ridge some 25 kilometres, right through to the Botanical Gardens and Wellington itself, but it was not yet in place, and to tramp it meant contacting around 30 landowners.

I could have sat down with the mobile and worked it through, but suddenly I was on an urgent deadline. Te Araroa's chairwoman, Jenny Wheeler, rang to say the Trust had arranged a mayoral reception for 3pm the next day.

I road-walked from Porirua to Ngaio, and stayed the night with my cousin, Maurice Gee, hefting the weight of the Deutz medal he'd just won for his new novel *Live Bodies*.

National Radio had scheduled an interview at 11.30am next day and I walked over Tinakori Hill on Wellington City's Northern Walkway.

No question, I was out of step with the city. The houses still looked like stage sets. I was still being left behind by the cars and the polished 4x4s. What would I say to Kim Hill? What was long distance walking anyway? The walking itself was effortless, and it was something to do with your head, floating on your shoulders like a Steadicam... Maybe that was it - that I was kind of - disembodied.

Yeah, so? That was pretty wordless. That would hardly fill up 20 minutes of air time.

Down through the Botanical Gardens, then I was ushered into a live studio.

Kim Hill's left hand was twisting a paperclip into unnatural shapes. She was doing a phoner with a scientist who'd just cloned the last seaweed eating cow on planet earth.

He'd taken DNA from the ovaries of the sub-Antarctic Enderby Island cow Lady and, using somatic cell transfer techniques and semen from a dead bull, had...

I sat there. It sounded complicated. All I did was walk.



"And now, into the studio with a *huge* pack has just *staggered*..." said Kim Hill. The interview went on a while. Twice as I talked, Hill signalled over my shoulder through the soundproof glass. We lost eye contact as she tapped on the keyboard, communicating to her producer, lining up the next interview.

In a natural situation, it meant lack of interest, and momentarily I was thrown. But it only required that I get more complicated. I was back in a world where people did two things at once.

What personal changes had I undergone? asked the presenter.

"I think," I said "I'm more primitive."

"More - feral," said Kim.

Fair comment. The hogo of trail sweat was still in my clothes. The long johns had holes in them. The boots were cracked, the sleeveless Chinese down jacket was patched with Sleek, the cap was frayed around the bill.

That was about as close as we got to psychology.

I hauled my pack around to the mayoral reception. Television One was due there to complete its piece, but Te Araroa had a talent for timing its big moments to coincide with political crisis. Prime Minister Shipley had just sacked the Treasurer, Winston Peters, and every news camera was at Parliament.

But it was a good meeting. We all sat around on sofas - Miriam, my daughter Irene, John Bould from Te Araroa Trust, and Liz Bould, Wellington City Council recreation planners Andrew White and Derek Thompson - and I took the mayor through the trail plan.

"You seem to be proposing," said Blumsky finally, "the tramping equivalent of Highway One."

Well, yes. The same thought had occurred to me walking up the stopbanks of the Waikato. The green-grassed banks, just a metre wide at the top, had stretched away along the side of our mightiest river with the beckoning allure of any clear highway, but, when they were finally opened to the public as part of our plan, they'd be for foot traffic only. Call it Byway One.

Or Te Araroa. It was almost real. I'd just got word that Environment Waikato, responding to the submissions we'd made six weeks before, had agreed to support the trail in principle right through its region.



And Blumsky was keen. He'd write to the Millennium Commission offering Wellington's support for the project. He'd get his planners to report.

I gifted the mayor a brand-new Leki stick - *Uses for a Leki Stick, #112, Political Patronage* - then walked on down to the inter-island ferry terminal, and called it quits there. Sometime, when the South Island trail was in place, I'd board the ferry and do the South Island too.

That night Miriam and I booked into the Bay Plaza Hotel on Oriental Parade. We went down to the restaurant for a meal, we drank red wine, and reeled back to the hotel room.

We hadn't monitored the news broadcasts. TV hadn't come to the reception, and would hardly run the story amidst the political meltdown. It was sheer serendipity therefore, reeling in right then, switching on the TV. The 9.30 News was on, just coming up to its magazine section. There was a tramper - some guy moving fast across bush trails and beaches and momentarily I marvelled at his speed, until I realised it was myself.

Why are you doing this? asked the interviewer.

"To let the trail speak," said the tramper confidently.

## The South Island

### The South - Section 1: Ship Cove - St Arnaud

#### #1 Departure

*Te Araroa heads south on the Queen Charlotte Walkway*



Queen Charlotte Sound from the walkway

A Cougar Line water taxi, its harsh little tannoy interrupting the dreaming passengers with detail of the various coves, islands and homesteads on the hour-long trip up Queen Charlotte Sound from Picton, delivered us finally to a jetty at Ship Cove.

Jump down, turn around, I was here. The northern end of the Queen Charlotte walkway, the start of Te Araroa in the South.

A happy barbecue crowd off the fizzboats and yachts was already ensconced along the lawns here, and those of us here to tramp, picked our way through them, and across a wooden bridge to spot the Captain James Cook monument.





Captain James Cook monument, Ship Cove

It was huge, white, stucco and though it had the aesthetics of a tank trap, I liked the thing. I liked the jaunty angle of the anchor at the top, the polished iron of the cannon at the base. Near the top of the monument, standing proud in brightly painted bass relief, a blue sailor's arm, truncated at the shoulder in the heraldic manner, brandished the British flag, and the banner beneath that said Circa Orbem.

The monument was counterpoint to something more subtle about the cove. It was pocket sized, which made it perhaps easier here than in any other of Captain James Cook's landing places to imagine these first British explorers of 230 years ago at their work. In 1770, Cook re-filled the Endeavour's water barrels at this stream - it bubbled still to the left of the monument. His sailors careened the Endeavour on gentle tidal slopes that still slope gently away. He raised the British flag on tiny Motuara Island, and turning seaward you could see the island, now a bird sanctuary, just a few hundred metres offshore. He climbed nearby Arapawa Island to a height of 370 metres and wrote in his journal - "I saw what I took to be the Eastern Sea and a Strait or passage from it into the Western Sea" - his first sight of Cook Strait. The cove was Cook's favourite New Zealand anchorage and he returned here five times during his three Pacific voyages.

The trampers wandered about adjusting packs, posing for photos at the monument, and I left them to it, setting off past the distance marker - the southern end of the track at Anakiwa was 72 km away.

Just over three years ago I'd finished an [off-road North Island tramp](#), testing the proposed New Zealand-long hiking trail, Te Araroa, from Cape Reinga to Wellington, and made myself a promise - sometime, when I'd figured a South Island route, I'd walk that too.

Ship Cove seemed the right South Island startpoint. Its latitude - S. 41deg. 05 - was slightly north of Wellington so there was a nice overlap which gave north-south continuity to the proposed New Zealand-long hiking trail. And it had historical cred.

I moved upward past fern, kawakawa, and rangiora that could have easily been North Island bush, then at about 100 metres altitude saw the first black beech trees. Joseph Banks, the botanist aboard Endeavour noted in his journal at Ship Cove "the most melodious wild music I have ever heard" - the bellbirds, and as I reached the level of the beech, they were still there, the same moss-green birds, gonging away.

I reached Furneaux Lodge on Endeavour Inlet, in just over four hours. Murder still haunts the inlet. Here at New Year's 1998, amongst the dozens of boaties celebrating that night on and off the water, two young revelers, Ben Smart and Olivia Hope took a water taxi to an unfamiliar yacht moored here, boarded it, and disappeared. Their bodies were never found, though police secured a murder conviction against yachtie Scott Watson.

New Zealand's boating fraternity was still at the bar or drinking on the lawns, but the scene was entirely pleasant. Kids played tennis on a grass court, and down at the water's edge, a father and son competed to skip stones across the pellucid water.

"That first skip mustn't be too big. You get that big jump, you lose everything."

"A six dad ! I got a six, a six, a six! "

I listened, realised I was a little homesick, and joined the Lodge manager Stephen Western, to look out on the manicured lawns, their centerpiece a ship's bell from a British warship on the Yangtse River of the 1930s, landlocked now on stanchions. In the 1950s, the old wide-verandahed homestead was offered to the Government as a Prime Ministerial retreat, the offer not taken up, and it fell, in this remote spot, into disrepair and some disrepute. I asked if the murders had affected trade.

Western was an ex-insurance broker who'd quit a thriving business in Takapuna two years ago, and made a snap decision, with his wife Sue and one other financial partner, to take on Furneaux.

"My dad died at 59 of a stroke," he said, "and my philosophy is this: call it a midlife crisis if you will, but you look at the last 10 years of your life, and that's what the next ten years will be like if you don't do something about it. If you don't break the mirror, you'll never see what's on the other side."

"The murders? No-one died here, this was just the last place they were seen. But it was five years ago, before our time and it was \$1 million of free advertising - everyone has heard of this place. We've put in a new management, we've rebuilt - replaced the tin cans that were holding up the beds."

And the artifacts? I asked. It has always seemed to me a peculiar part of New

Zealand's character that bizarre historical items wash up here. Ben Franklin's pocket knife in Wanganui, bits of Charles Babbage's famous first computer found holding open a farm door somewhere in Taranaki. Oaken planks, indented by grapeshot from the Battle of Trafalgar, remade into chairs. Bits of the world's first dinosaur bone collection.

What had happened to Furneaux Lodge's treasured ensign from Captain Robert Scott's first Antarctic voyage? Yes, and what the hell had happened to Queen Victoria's stocking?

"Gone," said Western. "Previous owners had financial trouble here, and those things were all sold off."

The dozen or so fellow trampers I was beginning to pass and repass on the trail were mostly holed up in Furneaux's backpacker accommodation, The Croft. The big wet that dominated the first half of January had already begun, and everyone was trapped inside, talking the backpacker talk of Asian, and South American adventures. Jonathan, the recovering adman from London had been trapped under a whitewater raft on a South American River for half a minute, and that had helped clear his head of all the bullshit. They were yarning, using English as the lingua franca, or they were reading books. Emma the 26 year old English woman was engrossed in D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Jonathan was into J.R.R. Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings*, Ariel Katz, the Israeli, was reading Michael Shalev's *One Hundred Winters*, about a Jewish family in Poland in the 19th century. Ariel looked up, looked out:

"I see why they call it the land of the long white cloud. The land of the neverending cloud I think."

"Well, I'm told it's very unusual for this time of year," said the recovering adman.

"Not true. I was here last year, and this is not unusual," chimed in the Frenchwoman."

"Has anyone," asked Katz, "heard the story of why the kiwi has a long beak?"

I was trying to concentrate on a GPS manual. I'd bought the GPS before setting out, and was trying to figure how to put in track way points, a useful skill for unmarked mountain routes. The Queen Charlotte Track was a simple, four-day, well-marked track, so it seemed a good place to trial the thing, but the manual was incomprehensible. I needed to experiment live, and I switched it on. The unit began to beep. It couldn't get enough satellites from the doorway of the croft, and to get its necessary fix, I put on a coat and stood outside with it in the rain.

## #2 Trail Temptation

*Te Araroa dines out and finds a lucky hanky*

At the Croft next morning few people moved far. They cooked their breakfasts, they rearranged their packs, they dipped into the novels. The rain beat down and the next leg of the walkway, to Punga Cove, was no more than three or four hours hiking distance. Everyone waited for the weather to lift.

But one by one they became reconciled, and went out into it. The Australian woman whose partner had eaten a bad peanut and had been ill from Ship Cove, saw him off back to Picton on the 11 o'clock water taxi, then cut arm-holes in a black plastic rubbish bag, posed briefly for the rest of us - "a bit daggy eh?" - and set off alone.

The recovering ad-man from London went. Then the Israelis. I took a hot shower. I'd neglected to pack a towel, and found a blue silken handkerchief, with no apparent owner, under my bunk. I rubbed one arm with it, wrung it out, mopped the other arm, and by such gradual absorption dried myself sufficiently to dress. It wasn't my kerchief though. I hung it out to dry on an internal Croft clothesline, donned the parka, put up the hood, unstrapped the Leki sticks in anticipation of a slippery track, and set off for Punga Cove.

One of the options on the four-day Queen Charlotte Walkway is to shorten it by two days, walking against the flow from Punga to Ship Cove. I passed a party of elderly Germans doing exactly that, walkers without packs or boots, confounded by the weather, their brollies blown out by the strong westerly wind. I passed a sign that said: "Is the dog with you? Please tie her up here." A leash was fixed to a post alongside, but not even a dog would have voluntarily gone gamboling with the trampers that day.

"I will have," I said, tracing with my finger the words off the menu of the Punga Cove Restaurant, "the world famous locally farmed mussels, steamed with garlic, onion, chili, capsicum, served in the half shell."

"As an entrée or main, sir?"

"As the entrée, and for a main I'll try the rib-eye steak with garlic butter, onion rings and kumara wafers, and - a glass also of the Twin Islands Pinot Noir - is that a local wine?"

"It's from Marlborough, yes."

"A glass of Twin Islands then - "

The restaurant windows looked out on the waters of the cove. Yachts floated below on pellucid water. A James Taylor tune from the 1960s drifted up from the bar down at the jetty. These things . . . the paper serviette, the crystal, the cutlery . . . was I really - tramping?

I'd reached Punga Cove wet. The water-taxi had ferried my main pack ahead of me, and it was waiting under a tarpaulin on the jetty. So would I now put up the tent at the damp DOC campground, or would I go to the classy backpacker accommodation on the hill - for \$35 a shared eight-bunk unit with linen on the beds, a hot shower, a heater to dry my gear, and a kitchen? I'd go for the linen. And having put everything out to dry and investigated the kitchen, would I now break out the dehydrate from the pack, or - on this evening, gentle after rain - eat at the restaurant? By such gradual degrees we are seduced, and that night I went postal with the Mastercard.

I introduced myself to the man who shared the table, Robert. He lectured in public health policy at a London University, and had come across from visiting colleagues in Australia just to walk the track.

"All of this," he said, gesturing past the picture window at the bushclad headlands, and coves, "who owns it?"



A weka eyes a walker's pack

Well, the Department of Conservation had large reserves in the sounds - public land - though how much, I didn't know. In the 1990s, private landowners had agreed to let the Department of Conservation and the Marlborough District Council cobble together the existing tracks into a single walkway that moved through forest, and some farmland.

On the foreshores it went on past Kiwi holiday homes - the purple-painted baches, the water tanks, the dunnies, the boatsheds. The track had become a huge success, tramped by professional people with swipe cards, and by backpackers with budgets enriched



Israeli women walking the Queen Charlotte Walkway



Punga (tree ferns) form a roof over the trail

by the exchange rate, some 18,000 walkers a year. If they spent only \$100 each on the way through - pretty much a minimum with the \$45 water-taxi fare to Ship Cove, the accommodations en route, the temptations of the track signs pointing off-route to a coffee shop or the luxury lodges down in the bays - the money generated each year by the track was around \$2 million.

"You hardly know what you've got here," said Robert. "Those thousands of tree ferns, I've seen nothing like them, they are so - so extravagant."

"The sounds are naturally beautiful," I said, "but in England it's surely as good - the countryside and the history. The Hadrian's Wall track - it's quite something to walk beside an old imperial frontier that's almost 2,000 years old. Kenneth Clark the art historian once wrote that he could enjoy a purely aesthetic experience no longer than he could enjoy the smell of an orange - about a minute. And isn't landscape the same? Unless you're held by it for other reasons, of history or geology say, the experience is fleeting."

"History," said Robert. "You can feel trapped by it. And trapped by people. In Europe every one of these headlands would have a millionaire's house overlooking the water. What's impressive here is not just your wilderness. It's the magnitude of your wilderness."

Next day I was first onto the track. The bootprints were no longer sharp-etched, but

adumbrated by the previous day's downpour and I was breaking spider silk that stretched side to side of the track. The sun was just up, the land was steaming. I stooped over toadstools, *Amanita muscaria*, balled bright red and bursting through their white membrane, or full-grown, the caps as big as dinner plates and dotted with the soft white remnants of the breached veil. Above, every pine needle was hung at its tip with a dewdrop, and a tui sang from the very top of the tree, like some black Christmas angel. I was high on the ridge between Queen Charlotte and Kenepuru Sounds, gazing at farmland far below and beyond it the mirrors of the shining sea, puzzled as to why the wake of every small craft down there etched a series of white u-turns. Of course! If you looked more closely you could just make them out - the towed dots, the added drama of the fast turn, the water skiers.

I was free-wheeling, I was feeling fine, and then I stopped dead. There, draped over a bit of dead gorse, was a blue silken handkerchief. It was carefully displayed. It was meant to be found. It was, I was sure, the same silken handkerchief I'd left at the Croft. Someone, perhaps the last to leave Furneaux Lodge that day, had picked it up and placed it here as a happy surprise to the owner, though if I was the first on the track, it was something of a mystery how it could have got here before me.

A trail mystery - excellent. I knew from experience in the north that a long trail turns you into a gypsy of sorts, seeking sign, seeking the cause behind coincidence. Good enough. I had a talisman of something or another, I believed in small gods, good luck, and I still had a long way to go. I took the hanky and tied it to a loop on my Leki stick.



### #3 Round the Rugged Rocks

#### *Te Araroa enters the Richmond Mountains*

I had a route mapped through the Richmond Mountains behind Nelson. A number of wise men looked at the plan and wagged their heads.

"By gosh Geoff - that's a very rugged route," said an old friend, Des Dubbelt, who'd tramped the range in the past. "This may well be your 'Heart of Darkness' - but no, that's a joke - that's a joke."

When passing through Wellington on my way south, I'd also shown it to Denis McLean, formerly New Zealand's Secretary of Defence, a man who walks and writes with a fine eye for geology and history.

He studied carefully the contour lines en route, as map-readers do.

"Hmnnnn - it's very steep country in there."

Trampers do not usually cross the Richmond Range north to south. The Alpine Fault runs parallel to, and just south of the range, and it seems to have pulled a noble landform to bits. No good connecting ridges exist, and the interior is high and jumbled. Trampers go in and they come out re-tracing their steps after an overnight in a hut, or they stick to the two- or three-day tramps that exit near Nelson or Richmond. To go right through is to accept a circuitous route. To go right through is to pack at least nine days' food. To go right through is to tramp around 125 km, almost double the distance of the Heaphy Track. To go right through is - inevitably - to step onto mountain-top routes which the Richmond Forest Park map describes as ". . . extremely demanding in poor weather . . . not recommended for any but the most experienced and well-equipped parties."

Well, Te Araroa was going through, but it felt the need for a companion. I rang Susan King from the Marlborough Tramping Club. Everyone was back at work, but she gave me one number to try, Kevin Wills, a LandSAR rep at the club, 24 years a trumper, formerly a fireman at Upper Hutt, now retired to Blenheim, age 65.

Kevin asked for a day to consider the proposition, but rang back within hours to say he'd do it. While we waited for a good weather pattern, I did the walk up from Anakiwa to Pelorus Bridge. My finders keepsers luck still seemed to be holding. On the roadside just beyond Havelock, I found a top-of-the-line Swiss Army knife, the one with everything on it, from magnifying glass, to saw and scissors, to toothpick and nail file, a few of its bits and pieces protruding, like a tumbleweed with a red oblong seed at its centre.



I walked on in pouring rain up the Maungatapu Road, marked a spot and persuaded a local to take me back to some comfortable accommodation. I was then ready to start the Pelorus River Track with Kevin at a moment's notice.

Kevin's pack had everything you might need for a long tramp but was also weighted with professional extras - binoculars for identifying distant landmarks, some 20 metres of rope, a carabiner for an unspecified emergency, a whistle, the Thunderer.

I was carrying only the necessities, but that included a mountain radio. It was no heavier, as everyone says by rote, than a lb of butter - but it was heavy nonetheless, and I estimated my nine-day pack at around 30 kilos. The only good thing about that was that day by day it had to get lighter.

Right at the start Kevin took the lead, and set a cracking pace.

Within minutes we struck a party of three chatting male trampers, who stepped respectfully aside.

"You go on through. You're obviously going some place, and I'm just talking bullshit here." It was a kiwi comment, from the trio's leader, and after the wash of English-as-a-second-language on the Queen Charlotte track, it was something of a relief to find fellow kiwis out in the forest.

Kevin went on, and was soon out of sight. The Pelorus River alongside the trail fell into deep green pools. The forest that rose up on its banks was mossed, gentle. The trail itself was brown with the confetti of fallen beech leaves, and the Richmond Range, despite its formidable reputation, seemed entirely friendly in these first hours in. A female South Island robin came visiting me, then a male, and the forest was full of a soft and dappled light.



Female South island Robin



Male South Island Robin

Only once did I catch up to Kevin on the flat.

"If I don't do this, I swell" He was stooped over a packet of antihistamine pills. He'd been stung by a wasp - a fact I put down to moving too fast into opposing traffic. Sometimes I could catch him up on the hills, but mostly he was a figure always vanishing in the trees ahead, and after a couple of hours trying to keep within a reasonable distance of him, my legs had turned to noodles. I stopped. I leaned on my Lekis. I'd had enough. I'd hit the wall. But there's always what's called your second wind. After a good long drink of water, I plugged on to Captain's Hut, arriving in something under two hours.

Kevin was already unpacked and setting up a hot drink. As he vigorously mixed the powdered milk in a small plastic shaker bottle, it frothed and bubbled, and I turned to him:

"Ah - that's got a good head on it - a latte coffee for tramping heroes who beat the suggested DOC tramping time of three hours to this hut Kevin."



Kevin Wills in the bush

"I think," said Kevin in the voice of a man not easily corrupted, "that cappuccino coffee is over-rated myself."

"Oh? You're a filter coffee man?"

"Cona coffee is usually boiled for too long. Or stewed more like it."

"What kind of coffee do you like Kevin?"

"Greggs Instant."

#### #4 First of the Summits

*Te Araroa reaches the tops.*

We crossed and recrossed the Pelorus River on suspension bridges, sometimes seeing huge trout in the pools. We stopped the second night at Roebuck Hut, checking in by mountain radio to get the weather forecast, then went on next day past Browning to spend the third night at Hackett Hut.

There we met a Japanese tramper. He'd left Nelson two days before. Against the advice of DOC, he'd come in alone, but with a huge pack, a compass strung round his neck, a good map, and plenty of fresh food. The Japanese quizzed Kevin as to various routes he might take within the Richmond Range, and Kevin obliged, but then I asked him - he wanted a long tramp, okay, did he want to come right through the range with us?

He did. His name was Tomonari Tanaka. Kevin and I poured boiling water over our dehydrate, stirred it, gave it ten minutes to soak through, then ate it, thoughtfully watching Tomo dice his onion, courgette, mushroom, carrot, garlic, cook it all with rice, and portion out the tinned tuna to complete a healthy meal.

That night none of us slept well. Sandflies were legion at every hut, but you could combat them by covering up - longjohns, socks, gloves, whatever it took, short of a balaclava, for namu don't seem to bite your face and neck with the same enthusiasm they show for arms and legs. And around 8.30 pm, they go away.

But at Hackett Hut we encountered for the first time the relentless mosquito. Dozens of them. By morning, every head was pulled inside its sleeping bag liner or coat. Every head was uncomfortably rebreathing a fair portion of its own hot air, but at least that kept the mozzies out of your face.



Next morning we climbed 1,000 metres through a gradually dwarfing beech forest. For the first time we broke out onto tussock, mountain daisies, snowberries, and mountain weather. As we reached Starveall Hut, stormclouds sailed in from the south, and after briefly spotting Wakefield far below on the plain, and the evanescent coastlines of Tasman Bay beyond, we hurried inside to light a fire. A cold southerly front was moving



Stormclouds gather over the Richmond Range



Starveall Hut

through, and thunder began to roll around the tops.

This small hut, wired to the ground against high winds, and by this storm, sundered from the rest of the world. Rain and cloud sweep across the summits, the bluffs, the valleys around the hut. Deep and distant views open and close around it. They trigger internal gratitudes, for the shelter, for companions whose lives, in this place, seem strangely potent. This is the power of the sundered hut.

In between squalls, Kevin glassed a faraway dot he guessed was Rintoul Hut, and he sought to confirm it with a compass bearing. We stooped over the maps and watched, heard his pneumatic.

"Good morning sunshine - Grid. Magnetic variation. Subtraction."

The bearing pointed directly across empty space at the faraway hut. Everything Kevin did had quality. The knots he used to bind two Leki sticks end to end and get the necessary aerial height for the mountain radio - professional knots. The porridge he'd set to soak in the pot overnight - it used less fuel when it came to the morning boilup. He was organised. The Blenheim storage depot fire of 1969 began his career. That fire is still a Blenheim legend. Oxy-acetylene bottles flew around the blazing sheds like missiles, and Kevin helped fight it as a volunteer. He became a professional fireman soon after.

The re-structuring of the Fire Service in the 1990s had, he believed, gutted the smaller depots of their specialised equipment. Staff cutbacks had weakened morale and the relationship of firefighters to their towns. He took early retirement, and went back with his wife Judith, who'd been breeding Persian cats and still kept a few as pets, to his birthplace, Blenheim. His hearing had been damaged by up-close work with pumps and tenders. He took up bowls and began to win Blenheim junior championship titles. He was on call for Search and Rescue. He neither smoked nor drank. During his time at Upper Hutt he'd regularly tramped the Tararua Range and if you asked him, why tramp, his answer was simple: "Because you're here. You're not there."

And Tomo? He'd saved \$18,000 to come down and thoroughly explore New Zealand - "To meet other cultures of the world." Not just New Zealanders, but the mix of cultures coming through New Zealand, he explained, and for a moment I saw the

South Island as he did, less an integral part of kiwi nation, and more as mountain backdrop - Tomo himself was based at a Motueka backpackers - where Israelis, Germans, Dutch, English, Americans, Irish, Koreans etc might rendezvous. The South Island was part of a larger archipelago for modern nomads, Lycra, or Gore-Tex skinned, or shiny with the polyester of Tomo's own faux-baseball Ultimates No 9 shirt.

And what did he do?

"When I finished at university I worked at the kind of hospital to make exercise - how do you say it? For the fat."

"Obese people."

"No." Tomo pulled from his pack a Canon electronic dictionary, keyed in a few Japanese characters, then pronounced:

"Diabites."

"Diabetics."

The storm had put us behind schedule. Next morning we started early. The weather was clear weather, but we leaned into a biting southerly. We climbed through to Starveall's 1500-metre summit, and descended towards Slaty Hut.

I'd spent much of yesterday's enforced stop trying again to insert waypoints on the GPS. I'd keyed in longitude and latitude points for Slaty Hut, and named the eponymous waypoint. Now, I kept the GPS turned on, and monitored its tiny screen. The black-line bearing that showed on-screen for Slaty Hut seemed at least plausible, and when the hut came finally into sight, that black-line bearing was pointing right at it. Great - in fog or mist that was potentially a valuable tool.

I picked my way down to the hut through clumps of Spaniard - the spiky *Aciphylla horrida* - distracted from paying further attention to the GPS, and it came as a distinct surprise when the little hand-held unit did something else that was very smart. It beeped and flashed a message on-screen: You are now approaching Slaty Hut.

Such is my reason to remember Slaty Hut. The second is that someone, incomprehensibly for we were now



Nearing Slaty Hut

remote, had carried into the hut and left there untouched and perfect, a whole pumpkin. We paused long enough for a hot chocolate drink, then went on over Slaty summit, along a tussocky ridge, and broke for lunch. Then on past drop-away bluffs, before climbing steeply another 200 metres to the summit of Old Man.



Kevin, Tomo and a distant Mt Rintoul

We were tired and thirsty by then. There'd been no water since Slaty Hut, but the Outward Bound School, which exercises sometimes on these mountains, had wired into place just below the ridge a small open water barrel. Rainwater on tap, chilled by a southerly wind straight off the Alps and Antarctica before that. I filled my mouth and held the water there, cold and hard as a ball bearing, then let it liquefy and slide away down my throat. The drink is one of tramping's true pleasures, and as we went on, six hours into the day's route, and determined still to make Rintoul summit and the hut that lay beyond it, we began to tire, to labour upon scree, and to endure true tramping pain.



## #5 The Primal Scree

### *Te Araroa's crisis*

The summit now in front looked as if someone had stood on the top and bucketed vast tonnages of shingle down every side.

Scree. To repel boarders, as it were. To deny you any purposeful striding to the summit. Scree. After you have thrashed away at the base of the mountain for some time, scree will allow you some yardage there. But there's still the problem of getting to the mountain-top.

It all starts cheerfully enough. Your boot takes its first step up the grey, granular sloping stuff and immediately slides backwards. The intended step has rearranged the hundred bits of loose shingle underfoot, but has achieved little distance.

The next boot. Same result. Both boots are now immured ankle-deep in the shingle, but you have gone nowhere.

Ha ! If you splay your feet that achieves greater traction, but the improvement is slight, and it reduces a serious endeavour to behaviour that looks alarmingly like a clowning routine.

Okay, so run at it. This is more red-blooded. Your left boot digs in before your right boot has time to complete its backward slide. Then the right boot digs in before the left boot has stopped sliding. It works, but it's exhausting, and often enough, unbalanced by your pack, you find yourself unable to anticipate correctly the resistances underfoot, and pitch forward - a second clowning routine - on your face.

The zig zag ascent, moving across the slope, works better, but your boots still often slip away downhill, and it's slow.

Finally you simply make opportunistic use of anything that works, including the occasional scramble on all fours. And always, you keep a sharp eye out for any scree that's more coarse than the viscous stuff underfoot, or any outcrop, or ridge which may be sufficiently boney to allow genuine progress.

The three of us climbed on steep scree slopes to a 1,640-metre shoulder. Rintoul's 1,730m summit was 1.5 km further on, and I think everyone nursed the secret hope that beyond this shoulder a gentle connecting ridge would lead away to the Rintoul summit.



Rintoul Summit

We came over the hill, and I heard Kevin mutter: "This is worse than the Tararuas!"

The connecting ridge was saw-toothed, precipitous, impossible. The poled route dropped away below it on broken rock, almost back to the bushline. To reach the Rintoul summit, we'd have to drop over 200 metres then climb again, 350-odd scree-strewn metres.

Dead legs climbed Mt Rintoul. The fifth ascent of the day was slow, dogged. Each of us took his own route. Each used his own psychology. Mine was to look for some kind of detail in the eternal broken rock. To stop. To look. To tell myself: *I'm still enjoying this - this pattern of lichen here whose subtle colours and patterns would make a useful batik. This vegetable sheep. So high. So alone. As vegetable sheep go, so small, but so determined. Ah - tenacious life, etc.*



Vegetable sheep

We regrouped at the summit. Tomo handed out small, dense, chocolate chip cookies that he'd made himself.



"Right, and you've brought the ice cream Kevin. I just hope it hasn't melted."

"It's not the ice cream that's melted, it's what's underneath it," said Kevin. He sat looking out over the immensity of the range, fold after fold of blue, and said matter-of-factly:

"This is too hard for a pensioner."

The day's tramp was not over. We crossed over the firm rocky mosaic of the summit, then descended steep slopes of scree.

Coming down scree is usually fun. You take huge strides, do ski-style turns, you hoot and holler. But after 11 hours of slog, the strength in your legs is suddenly unreliable. A leg may lock suddenly at the knee, may momentarily turn into a jolting stick that makes your teeth clatter. May present a momentary picture of yourself, off down the slope, swinging forward from the hip, stiff-legged, uncontrollable, like those walking toys when tipped at the right angle on a board. So you descend slowly. Even so, another leg briefly threatens to bend backward at the knee, like the leg of a chook . . .

Rintoul hut was 500 metres down from the summit, well below the bushline. It was late by the time we finally made it, heaving down packs that were wet with sweat, and setting up the mountain radio.



We laid out the 40 metres of aerial. To solve the usual problem of raising the mid-point of that aerial 4 metres, I found a ladder, but it was Kevin's practical skills, his binding and propping with bits of 4x2 that stood the thing upright in the field.

*ZKMM Base to ZKMM One.* Paul Rennie, a radio ham and power company linesman in Blenheim operated a mountain radio service from his house, and before leaving Blenheim I'd picked up a radio from him, ZKMM One. Every night at 8.30 we tuned in, and Paul called, on the dot.

*ZKMM One to ZKMM Base.* Yes, we're hearing you loud and clear Paul. We've reached Rintoul Hut after a hard day. Should reach Mid Wairoa Hut tomorrow. Over.

Paul gave the weather, and threw in, as always, a bit of news.

*The Black Caps have beaten South Africa in the latest tri-series. Chris Cairns whacked a couple of sixes. Chris Harris may have to leave the team, and come back to New Zealand for family reasons. The Aussies haven't struck a blow yet.*

The Black Caps! Out in the hills, cricket, and the 6 o'clock news all seemed a long way off. What was real was the hunger. What was real was the leaping flame as I fired up the Whisperlite to cook a meal. What was real was the subtle pleasure, once the tramping day was over, of fatigue. What was real was the mountain cloud that had now rolled over the hut. We'd tramped 11.5 hours that day, and later, as we held our hot chocolate drinks in a mist-shrouded world, Kevin turned to me and said:

"Geoff - these people you're expecting might do this South Island trail - the backpacker adventurer types, or any fit New Zealander. Are you sure it's not just too hard?"

I thought back on the last five days. The big packs. The rough condition of the river track between Middy and Roebuck huts, where you descended often on slippery rock, clinging to beech roots, your pack bumping and grinding, threatening your balance. The windfalls across the track. I remembered the steep pinch coming up to Starveall. The Rintoul shoulder, where we'd had a small taste of what mountaineers call exposure - hanging your bum out over a drop. I thought of the five summits, the rockfields and the scree . . . Did all of it add up to a trail that was too hard?

"Well, it's occurred to me," I said a little grimly. "But personally, I'm still having fun."



Next morning we hiked on toward the Purpletop summit. Kevin led out, but stopped soon after, to bandage his feet. I went on, catching up to Tomo, who was studying his map, identifying the high points that lay all around.

We dropped down to bush ridge tracks again, Kevin again leading, but an hour or so on he was waiting.

"Geoff, I've got a serious suggestion. We both feel that this track may be too long and too hard for the kind of people you think might use it. We could stay at Tarn Hut tonight, then drop down to the Goulter River tomorrow. That'll shorten the route, make it easier, and it still gets you through the range."

We laid out the maps to have a look. I counted the little blue kilometre squares from the proposed new exit point to the beginning of the next leg.

"That route would leave you 32 km short of St Arnaud," I said. "I don't want to be dogmatic about this, but I'd really like to stay on the proposed route. And I'd really

like to do the Red Hills."

Another 5 km down the track, where the track branched right to Lower Wairoa Hut and the Red Hills, or left to the Goulter River, Kevin was waiting.

"I'm going to drop down to the Goulter, stay at the Lower Goulter Hut tonight, and walk out tomorrow."

"Yep. Okay."

"You know how to do the radio now. You've got Tomo as a companion. In the radio sked tonight ask Paul to ring my wife and get her to meet me at 12 noon tomorrow on the Patriarch road."

Kevin had already broken out of his pack the extra food and drink that might be useful to me for the three tramping days ahead. He handed across tea bags, chocolate powder, snack-size Crunchies and Moros, an extra BackCountry dehydrated meal.

I was sad about it. Kevin had seemed indestructible. The worst sign of stress I'd seen was on the steepest of hills, when he'd pop a Chupa Chup into his mouth, and, with the little lollypop's plastic stick issuing at a jaunty angle from his mouth, simply keep going. But I knew he had good reasons for pulling out, and I shook his hand.

"You've been great Kevin. You've led the group through a tough route, and I'm grateful for it."

"I'll go round to Paul's and listen to your radio skeds. When you're due out of the Red Hills, I'll bring the van up, and I might just tramp in to meet you."



Later that day I knew that the decision to go on was the right one. The beech forest opened suddenly onto a distant view that made me catch my breath.

I stopped. Tomo stopped.

I pointed towards one of New Zealand's strangest rock piles.

"The Red Hills, Tomo. Dramatic."

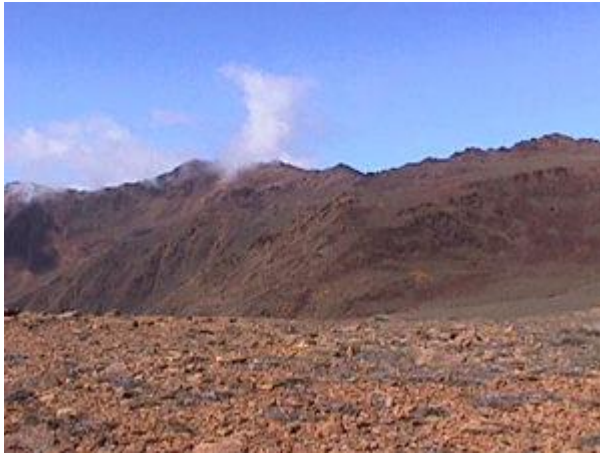


## #6 The Red Hills

*Te Araroa encounters a deep-sea ophiolitic sequence.*

The Red Hills, Red Mountain, Red Hill, Little Red Hills - around Nelson and Fiordland these names occur, and recur.

The art of naming, by which we distinguish our landscapes, has apparently been betrayed here. When you first see the duplications of Big Reds and Little Reds on the maps of the South Island interior, you suspect a failure of human imagination.



Still, when I first saw The Red Hills north of St Arnaud, no other name for them came to mind. They were bare, strange, and red, and I was thrilled. Ever since reading a book, *Assembling California* by John McPhee, which described the so-called ophiolitic sequences of Cyprus, I'd been intrigued. Worldwide, the phenomenon is rare, but when I looked up ophiolitic in the indexes of New Zealand geology, there it was - a long splinter of the stuff in the Richmond Range. Dun Mountain above Nelson was part of it, but the belt stretched both north and south of that.

In 1859, above Nelson, the Austrian geologist Ferdinand Hochstetter held a heavy piece of red rock in his hand and named, for the first time, dunite. It was plutonic rock, from the earth's mantle, and no good explanation existed for its appearance. Geologists right through to the 1960s referred to the Nelson ophiolite belt as rock disgorged - somehow - from a chasm in the earth. The chasm had produced an ophiolitic sequence that included the smooth jade-green serpentine which weathers to red, the black speckled gabbro, periodotite, basalt and the abrasive pyroxene crystals.

In 1959 the geologist Jan Brunn, studying an ophiolitic sequence in Macedonia, thoughtfully compared those ophiolites to the rock being dredged just then from the Mid-Atlantic ridge, a centre of sea-bed spreading. Tectonic plate theory was not yet established though, and Brunn's work went unnoticed.

By 1968, plate theory - that light continental land masses ride on rigid but spreading

sea-bed plates - was the new orthodoxy. Compared to the continental crust, the plates are thin, their rock is dense and heavy, disgorged from the mantle itself at the mid-ocean ridges, and later, subducted back into the mantle in the deep-ocean troughs at the plate boundaries. But the dense and heavy rock from the plates does not surface.

"I'd like to say of the Red Hills," I said to Mike Johnston a geologist who has worked for 25 years mapping the complex geology around Nelson, "That as the plate was subducted, a piece of it was peeled off, that it ploughed across the land like a rogue liner."

"The ship metaphor implies a point," said Johnston. "A bow, whereas in fact it's broad. A barge perhaps, and it didn't slide across the land, it went into the crust and the crust then weathered away, exposing the rock in a few places. Here - "



He did a few quick sketches on my notepad, showing the ophiolites in their original upwelling at the mid-ocean ridge, and their later lodging in the crust:

"The belt has been mapped by magnetics from New Caledonia down the west coast of the North Island. It comes onshore at D'Urville Island, onshore again at Croisilles Harbour, through the Rai Valley, then Dun Mountain and the Red Hills. It reappears in Fiordland, goes across Otago then disappears in fragments out to sea.

"That's all part of the ophiolite belt , but it's only in the South Island it's been unroofed."

"Why?"

"We're closer to the Alpine Fault. And that explains the disappearance of the ophiolite belt between the Red Hills near St Arnaud, and the Red Hills and Little Red Hills in Fiordland - it's part of the same belt, but fractured by a slip-strike fault. The offset in the Alpine Fault over a period of about 20 million years, is 480 km."

I wondered aloud to Mike Johnston why the Red Hill phenomenon did not attract

more interest.

"In the 1970s," said Johnston, "ophiolites were the thing to be studying in New Zealand geology. You were looking at a piece of the mantle, you were looking at the end result of subduction. "

"These rocks were sexy."

"If you like."

"So what happened?"

"Good question - when I was a kid everyone knew about the mineral belt, but nowadays it's not mentioned. In the first half of this century, the school-kids would form up in crocodile fashion to go into the hills and study the plants and rocks up there. Now the kids get into buses and go off kayaking around Abel Tasman National Park. Outdoor recreation is the new thing - the earth sciences are no longer as popular as they were."

## #7 Seeing Red

### *The silence of the land - Te Araroa's tramping lesson*

We made Mid Wairoa hut by late afternoon, and Tomo was soon flicking through the hut book. Already fairly fluent in English, he always studied the trumper comments to improve his grasp on the language.

"What is *Loo*?"

"It means lavatory, Tomo."

"Ah - new word. Good. And this one *Meat-safe*?"

"You'll see a box outside the huts with mesh sides. It lets the air in, but keeps flies off the pig or deer kills. Hunters use them."

"*Corro*?"

"Corrugated iron. Look it up in your electronic dictionary."

Tomo keyed it in: "Making a wrinkle, making a waving or something."

"Not exactly. New Zealand is a young society. We built shelters in the back country and we used corrugated iron. We fenced with No 8 wire. These things became symbols. We're affectionate towards them. See someone's written here: '*At last ! Marmite in squeeze tubes*'. Same sort of thing. Corrugated iron. No 8 wire. Marmite. They're New Zealand icons, but they're clown icons. I think New Zealanders don't take their national symbols as seriously as America, or Japan."

"*And this one,*" said Tomo. "Bit of a grunt"?

"It's tramping slang Tomo. A hard slog - a big effort to get someplace."

On the trail next morning, I had the privilege of setting Tomo right yet again.

"Aaaiii ! Wasp bite! A bite!"

"No Tomo, you were stung. That is *a wasp sting*."

He more than repaid my meticulous tutoring later, picking up from where it had come untied and dropped onto the trail behind me, a tattered piece of cloth.

"Geoff. This is yours ?"

My lucky blue hanky.



Wairoa River, waterfall

For hours we followed a wilderness track alongside the Wairoa River, sometimes high above it in the gorges, sometimes crossing and recrossing it. Then the beech forest stopped abruptly. The hills ahead sloped away red, so rich in magnesium and iron that the forest recoiled, and only stunted shrubs remained.



Upper Wairoa River, rust lichen

We climbed a steep river bank, and I picked up shiny, jade-green fragments of rock. Serpentinite. The track, across a small plateau, led directly to the Upper Wairoa Hut, right on the margin of the Red Hills. The hut was remote - in January, just four people had passed through, Allen and Sue Higgins from the Wellington Tramping and Mountaineering Club, Frederick and Claudia Anheuser from Germany. It was swept and clean. It had firewood, an axe, a gypsy hook over the grate, billies, Readers Digest of October 1983, a bible, a novel, *The Hill Station* by J G Farrell.



In one corner was a galvanised bucket, with seven dry blowflies in it, which I took down to the Miner River and cleaned. Then I allowed the bucket sinkage in a pool, and carried it back, brimming. The riverwater tasted hard, bitter.

[Te Araroa's proposed route](#) was to climb to a 1,370-metre saddle then follow the poled route north across the flanks of Mt Ellis before curving south again round the edge of the Red Hills, to Hunters Hut - that was a day's tramp - then to Porter Hut - another day's tramp. Then out to St Arnaud.

Tomo and I spread out the maps. What if we climbed to the saddle then turned directly south, hiked up to Porter Ridge, along the ridge some six kilometres, then dropped down a long spur to Porter Hut? That would trim a full day off the Richmond Range tramp. It would also take us through the middle of the Red Hills. It was an unmarked route and it was high, but it looked okay.

We agreed to make the decision next day at the saddle. We'd do it, but only if the weather held.



The track to the saddle was steep and marked by DOC orange triangles, or cairns. Tomo wanted to move ahead faster than me, but the mist was down, we'd lose sight of each other, and we came to an agreement. He'd stop and wait every half-hour, or, if he felt there was any ambiguity in the track, he'd wait at that point.

I was alone, enclosed by mist. The tough little plants around me were doubly dwarfed - their growth constrained by altitude and calcium deficiency. Even the hardy matagouri was a flattened creeper in the rocks.

Underground streams tinkled underfoot. Water spilled occasionally down rock faces,



and I drank: Tectonic Water - flinty flavours with a hint of bottom rock and a bitter aftertaste. I was having fun. Right then, I could have marketed barrels of this stuff around the world. Tectonic Water cures cancer - No, that was probably going a bit far. Tectonic water - causes cancer. No, that wouldn't fly.



I pushed on up through waist-high tussock, and as I reached the saddle the sun burned away the last of the mist and opened views through to Red Hill (1790 m), the highest point in the Richmond Range Forest Park. It was a good day.

Okay - we'd do the unmarked route along Porter Ridge. I notched into the GPS the spur we'd need to descend later and we climbed to 1600 metres. By then the ridgeline that had looked relatively smooth on the map was a mass of steep and jagged rock. We took an obvious detour, sidling around a rock-field below the ridge. The rocks were big, they forced you to jump one to the other. I saw Tomo leaping and balancing with his two hill-sticks somewhere below me, but turned back to my own leaping, the clatter of my Lekis, and lost sight of him. Half an hour on, I reached the end of the rock-field. A tussocky flank stretched away south, and it was an easy sidle up to the ridge.

There was no sign of Tomo. I called, and listened. No reply.

If he'd come through ahead of me, as was likely, the edge of the rock-field seemed a natural place to wait. In case he was still behind me, I simply waited there. Even if he'd gone on towards the ridge though, he should be in sight, and after a time I went on myself, but slowly, looking over my shoulder.

The fact was, I didn't know if he'd emerged safely from that jumbled field. I remembered how some of the big rocks in there had moved underfoot, threatening your balance. It was an unforgiving place to fall.

He could be in there, injured. Unlikely. But possible.  
I called and listened.

One part of me knew this was a silly mistake. He'd turn up. Another part of me had him lying in the rockfield, brained. It would be an enormous area to search, full of big

rocks and cavities.

The blue day had a tinge of menace. That cloud way out to the west was a hard, self-contained, over-bright, over-perfect, cloud, like those glossy models of their meals that Asian restaurants display. It winked in the light. It was high above the plains. It was dead-level with my head. It was being borne in, inexorably, from the west . . .

Get a grip. But altitude is always a little spooky. You don't linger in the tops, yet I was lingering. Time was going by, and we needed time for any unpredicted impediments on the ridge route. I was angry, worried, exasperated.

I called again. The blank hills gave nothing back. Not even an echo.

The ground around me was fairly open and either strewn with small rocks, or lightly tussocked. You could see a long way, but as you moved across it, softly contoured spurs rose and fell, and obscured a lot of territory. I called. I moved across the land, angling upwards, but kept a bearing on my exit point from the rock field, in case I had finally to go back there and search.

Half an hour went by. Way off to the north, on a rocky highpoint, a human silhouette appeared, stood looking. It was too far away to call. I waved, but there was no answering wave. I opened the pack, emptied the bright yellow packliner, and held it up. Too late, the figure was gone.

I set off toward the rocky outcrop, climbed it myself, called, descended again, and then Tomo appeared around a rocky corner. We looked at each other:

"This is not my fault!"

"Where were you!"

"I wait on the ridge."

"I was calling."

"I heard you call. I call back."

"We have a wind from the west. You could hear me, but I couldn't hear you? Why didn't you come down?"

"I wait. The ridge is the route. The ridge is the route. We both know the ridge is the route. You should come up to the ridge."

Exiting the rockfield, he'd cut straight up to the ridge, through broken rock. That route hadn't occurred to me. To me, the obvious route to the ridge was to follow the tussock up in a more oblique side.

We talked past each other for a moment, then Tomo suddenly banged his two hill sticks sharply on the ground.

"My English . . . My English . . . So - so - frustrating !"

I looked at him.

"Are we still going to do Porter Ridge?"

"We are not going to do the ridge," said Tomo, anticipating my rejection.

"Yes we are - we're doing the ridge. You want to lead off?"

"I will never go in front. Never!"

"Right."

The yellow liner was still blatantly secured to the outside of my pack. Useful just a few moments before, it was vaguely insulting to anyone following on now, but I didn't care too much. I walked south, going back over our tense exchange. Somewhere in that exchange, Tomo had said he'd been right back across the rockfield looking for me. He'd been as concerned as I was - he'd done more perhaps, in respect of searching, than I had. He was as right as I was. I stopped and stuffed the yellow liner back in my pack. As Tomo came up, I held out my hand.

"It's a cultural misunderstanding Tomo. You did what you thought best, and so did I. When we meet Kevin again, we'll see what he says - he's a search and rescue man."



To the east, Porter Ridge dropped away into a red glaciated valley, a landscape so smooth as to look almost upholstered. We passed house-sized chunks of pitch-black rock from which rose pitch-black butterflies. Grasshoppers with red armpits sprang back and forward across our path. I scooped up sand, and slipped it into a plastic bag for the later delight of my friends. The heaviest sand, the reddest sand, in New Zealand - the world.

So we walked finally along a high ridge of Mars, and the two of us finished the walk easy with each other again, taking turns to lead, and discussing the differences in the Japanese concepts of beauty. Kirei - beautiful. Shibui - beautiful, but also cool.

A rocky descent to Porter Hut left me, for the first time en route, with blisters, but happy nonetheless. The evening came on perfect. No wind. No cloud. A thousand frogs began to croak in a nearby swamp. The South Island twilight lingered beyond the dark horizon of bush in a broad band of yellow, shading up to purple where Jupiter shone.

"Shibui Tomo?"

"Yes. Shibui."

We tramped out of the Richmond Range next day. Kevin drove out along Highway 62, to meet us, and I marked a fencepost at the roadside, ready to start the 12 km walk down to St Arnaud next day. But meantime, we were hungry for good food, and over a restaurant dinner in Blenheim that night we did the whole trip again, and laid out the incident on Red Hill for Kevin's judgement.

"The mistake was - you didn't stay together. Right at the beginning of that rock field, it was important not to lose sight of each other."

"And do either of you have a whistle? I suggest you carry a whistle."

## The South - Section 2: St Arnaud - Arthurs Pass

### #8 Forests of Forgetfulness

#### *Encounters in the Nelson Lakes National Park*

I walked the 12 road kilometres to the lakeside town of St Arnaud, went into the DOC office, told them what I was doing, got the weather report, signed an intentions slip for a departure next day, predicted an exit on Lewis Pass six days out, and went out to shop.

The garage-cum-general store was stocked for trampers with a big range of dehydrated food, but I already had dozens of packets, and besides, I was sick of it. I'd lost what little subcutaneous fat I could spare on the Richmond Range. No matter the weight, for the five- or six-day tramp ahead, I'd take as much real food as I could so I bought fruit, carrots I could eat raw, full-cream milk powder, and an especial luxury, a 1 kg block of cheese, a salami sausage. Outside the shop, a bellbird gonged beside the Mobil sign.



Next day on the Lake Rotoiti trail the bellbirds, lots of them, gonged again beside still water, above the long square boxes of the mustelid traps where hens' eggs were visible through the mesh.

An Israeli trumper came by - a close haircut, wire-rimmed specs, and we exchanged destinations, noted the beauty of the birdsong, the reflections off the lake that gave a cinematic uplift to the beech forest before he moved ahead.

"Damn!"

The Israeli turns, but does not break stride for a kiwi trumper who stands stock-still, fists balled in a kind of anguish, remembering suddenly his final ritual check for any leftover gear at the St Arnaud cabin.

The trumper stands in the middle of the room, and his ritual goes like this. Like some goal ump in Aussie Rules football he snaps his arms out parallel, index fingers en pointe, quivering with the tension. Slowly he completes a 360degree revolution. The

outstretched arms frame successive sections of the room and serve to concentrate his attention on that segment and no other. Within the segment, his eyes scrub and scrutinise every surface. Nothing is left behind here.

Standing now stock-still on the track the trumper remembers this radar-like apparatus, which is himself, turning slowly toward the squat bit of whiteware under the sink-bench.

"Damn!"

The quivering digits pass slowly across the blank fridge. The cheese and the salami stand practically on end within, shouting to be seen in the chilly darkness, but the fingers move on, the trumper completes his revolution. Nothing is forgotten here. He hoists his pack and is gone. Such élan. Such confidence. Pathetic, the whole thing.



I was headed towards mountains higher than anything in the Richmond Range, but the approaches were easier and prettier. I tramped on past the head of the lake, and began to follow a path alongside the Travers River as sweetly bordered as any botanical park.

I chose a riverside knoll and swung the pack down, shook up some milk, broke out an orange, a banana, ate crackers without cheese and to my surprise, the same Israeli who'd passed me earlier came past again. We said hello, and I went to hoist my pack.

"Damn!"

The bottom half of one of the Lekis - two tapering tubes, adjustable for height, friction-fixed by a twist - was untwisted, gone, lying somewhere back there on the track. Well, forget that too.

I spent that night at John Tait hut. I'd brought a radio to see if I could pick up the National Radio mountain forecasts at 4pm, but there was no reception in the valley. I tried the short-wave. Chinese, then French, then a bass-enriched American voice, pulsed out of the ionosphere. The New York Stock Exchange had delisted Enron Corporation. An enquiry into the company's off-the-book partnerships was underway. Enron executives were suspected of reaping millions even as the share price fell from \$90.75 to 16c. The voice switched to a letter released by the White House. Sent by an



Afghani family to the US president, it told of the pain of losing a family member to US bombing - "we have lost a brother, but we believe America's war in Afghanistan is a just war." I pressed the tuning button until a BBC voice surged through the static. "Enron Corporation has been the number one career patron of President George W. Bush."



Upper Travers Hutt

Next morning I went on to Upper Travers Hut. By then I'd come 20 kilometres alongside the Travers River, and beyond the hut, I stepped onto a small wooden bridge. At its source in this mountain basin the Travers produced no more water than you might pour from a large pot. I zigzagged on up to Travers Saddle.



The exhilarating clarity and cleanliness of the saddle. From this high and hallucinatory place, Mt Travers rose a further 500 metres, a black triangle of rock with patches of gleaming summer snow against a sky of pure cerulean blue.

At 1,787 metres, this was the highest point yet on the South Island walk. Whether by improved fitness or better trails, these steep pulls up to altitude seemed easier now, and to the north where mountain upon mountain stretched away in purple haze, I saw what I thought was Mt Rintoul.

The fact of my own foot-trail from some over-horizon Marlborough cove, across the distant Rintoul to this saddle felt good. Underfoot, the tussock, the red alpine flowers, the green cushion plant, with its myriad of

tiny white-petalled flowers, slid on by.

The descent off the mountain was slow and rocky. I skidded away down an old avalanche swathe of hard-packed gravel and I'd just reached the bushline again when a tui flew out of a beech tree and thudded onto the dry trail behind. As I turned to watch, the bird hammered the dust with its beak. It fixed me with a round eye and slowly fanned out one wing, extending all the feathers. The black iridescence of the display was strangely hypnotic. What colours ! What size ! I'd never seen such a potent tui. We were eyeball to eyeball, but only one of us moved. The bird did a quarter-circle, holding out the wing like a bullfighter's cape, then jumped into the air and with fast papery wingbeats sped past me into the tree overhead. A large dead twig, thick as a finger, and perhaps five times as long, dropped out of the tree and landed at my feet.



I moved on down to the valley below and was surprised to see the stoutest bridge I'd ever come across in the New Zealand bush. Guard rails at the approach - why guard rails? It wasn't until I stood there, shaking the rails for their strength, that I realised what I was looking at.



The crack was no more than 2 metres wide. Water suffused the mossy overhangs within it, then dripped away into the dark. I stepped onto the bridge itself. It had concrete footings. The underpinning beams were 14 cm wide, and near twice as high. The uprights either side of the bridge were strung through with hawsers anchored in the concrete. A short bridge over an abyss.

I looked at the little orange asset number on its side: 001734. This would be entered on computer, red-flagged as to when its engineering inspection was due. It was triple-safe, even to the point of redundancy, still I found myself cautious as I peered over the edge and took in the occasional liquid flash and eerie gurgle of the East Sabine River 35 metres below.

Some hours later I reached West Sabine Hut. Outside a German woman was pegging out dry clothing on a line. Inside a DOC warden was hunched over some paperwork. An English couple asked questions about the route out of the park next day, I broke out the maps, and the DOC warden was soon alongside, introducing himself as Stu Bennett, poring over the maps, full of advice to the English, but as quickly enchanted by the possibilities of his own exploration.

"I've earned a little free time. I've climbed Travers. I want to climb Franklin. I should have climbed Mt Franklin today. Uh " - and he did a quick fist-clenching jive - "I wanna go play in the tops!"

"Going off-trail releases the endomorphines man. That's why Disneyland has got no chance of recreating what we've got here. People witter on at me - *Oh that track down from Travers Saddle was so bad. We fell over. We went off the path. We got lost. You must improve that track.* I look at them and say: *But you did it. You got here. You did something hard. You feel good. Right?*"

Evening came on. We cooked noodles, rice. My plans to walk the South Island were known by then, and I was on a fuss. Stu Bennett volunteered me fresh vegetables from his warden's room, and mushrooms. I repaid a bit of the kindness with half of my dehydrated Backcountry Lamb Fettucine. We ate, and talked -

"We love walking", said Brandon Webb, out of London "Once you get above the top fields in England, once you get onto the high fells, by tradition, you can walk where you like, but there's big pressure from the public in say the Lake or Peak Districts. You're seldom alone, but here - "

"Wilderness during the day - people at night," said Ruth Webb, massaging her legs with liniment.

"In New Zealand, you walk a couple of days and see no-one," said Tobias Mensel from Heidelberg.

"You are at the end of the world," said Christiane Ziebart, also from Heidelberg.

"And you are lucky you have so much mountains that are still okay," said Tobias.

"Keep them okay," said Christiane. "We use no soap in the mountains. We wash our clothes only in the air."

"The birds are gone," said Stu Bennett suddenly. "This country has ripped out almost all its lowland forests. When settlers arrived here they saw the woodpigeon flying

literally in their thousands on the coastal plains, flocks of 50 or more, flying between the lowlands and the uplands. These are the species that are decimated now. The cold forest birds like the huia lived in the mountains but needed to feed in the coastal swamps in winter. They're completely gone. The kaka - almost gone, and why? The lowland part of the ecological jigsaw was taken. Eighteen bird species disappeared with the loss of the lowland forest. Now it's the introduced predators, the rat, the possum, the ferret, and another 60 bird species crashing."

There was a silence in the hut. All jolliness had fled.

"Ecological rescue," I said "that's one thing. But a nation also signals its strength and soul by nature. The Black Forest in Germany, and the Rückenfigur. In England there's the oak, a Countryside Agency charged with preserving the charm of the countryside, and the Rambler."

"New Zealand has its natural symbols - the fern, the kauri, the kiwi. But also it's not a metropolitan nation. Lots of New Zealanders work out-doors. Lots of them play out-doors. The angler. The surfer. The kayaker. The hunter. The tramper. We're a smart island nation. We know nature in our work and at play. We won't let the birds die."

"New Zealand is a country close to nature - I agree," said Tobias. "But if you get to the supermarket you get still 6 plastic bags. This is not so smart. In Germany you have to buy the bag - one bag."

The English and Germans went to bed, and I went outside to brush my teeth. Stu came out on his way to the warden's room and we stood on the decking, under the stars.

"What you said in there," said Stu, "I'd like to think that's true. I find these other things depressing really. It's Tim Flannery *The Future Eaters*. Geoff Park *Nga Uruora*. The fact is - I can't put my finger on what it is round here, but I've never been happier."

We both looked at the dark slopes of beech, the silhouette of high rock, the Sabine River.

"So why is that?" I said.

"What was said in the hut tonight doesn't get there does it?"

"No. I'm interested in this. A vocabulary for nature in the early 21st century. I've read Emerson, but his style doesn't hold now. I've read Thoreaux, and he's good, but he

sees celestial cities in the sunsets. Let's start with a word. Just one word."

"Sustainable?" said Stu

"No."

"Raw."

"Okay. I like raw."

## #9 Waiau Pass

*Aesthetics and a southerly buster in the Nelson Lakes National Park*



I tramped up the trail to Blue Lake and though I'd never been on the track before, I passed scenes that seemed familiar.

The Sabine River tumbling down over boulders, mountains behind: I had a pleasant sense of something resolving into a preordained pattern. I'd seen this scene before, though whether as a painting or photograph I couldn't remember.

And maybe it was neither painting nor photograph. Just a resonance, triggered perhaps by a landscape that fulfilled some abstract interior template of beauty, of rightness.

The trail crossed a terrace. To my left, the Sabine River turned wide and shallow and babbled over a streambed of brown-algae pebbles. To my right lay a reflective pool. Chunks of black rock, sculptural in size, lay tumbled at the edge of the pool and beech trees grew between the rocks, bonsai height. A series of wooden bridges spanned the moist channels that drained the pool and the whole place was - *shibui* I thought, beautiful but cool too, like a Japanese garden.



*Been here before? No never. Sure feels like it.* I went on into the dappled shade of the beech forest. Were these significant thoughts or was I engaging here in the same sort of ratiocination that boils through the mind of a sparrow when deciding which crotch



of the tree to put its nest?

I went on up to Blue Lake hut. Stu Bennett arrived soon after. He'd stayed behind to clean Sabine Hut then had come up the track behind me, clearing windfalls, blocking divergent tracks.

"I tell people often about that. Walk through the mud puddles or you'll make the track 15 feet wide. Take your rubbish out with you. Enjoy the simplicity of tramping."

"And don't shit near waterways."

I restocked the hut with firewood, sawing off dead branches from standing trees. I came and went, and Stu was the proverbial white tornado. He cleaned the hut windows. The tables. The bench. The floors. Dumped all the ash out of the woodburner. Shook and aired the mattresses. He made a primitive plunger and went out to the loos, the worst job, packing it all down for the chopper.

Then we went and stared into the glassy depths of Blue Lake. I stripped and swam in the eye-popping cold. We explored down the lake's single outlet stream, puzzled as to how this meagre outflow could so suddenly become the spunky Sabine River just over the hill, then found the second lake outlet, a big clear jelly of water upwelling in the forest. Evening came on and the valley's rocky walls fell into shadow, but beyond the jagged edge, one summit still held the rosy light - Mt Franklin, highest peak in the Nelson Lakes National Park.

"Come up here and play," muttered Stu.

Night fell. We ate dehydrate and the last of the deliquescent mushrooms and yellowing broccoli from Stu's bag of vegetables. We brewed coffee, and went outside to look at the stars.

"Cinnamon and peach tea," said Stu. "Sometimes the huts are crowded and very lively. This Israeli guy came into West Sabine hut - he'd just done this mammoth walk up from St Arnaud - and he boiled the water and pressed upon everyone in the hut a glass of his special tea. It was - kind of - compulsory. We drank a toast - *Shalom!*"

"I kept watching him. Some kiwi trumper was going off in my ear - DOC hasn't done this, DOC hasn't done that, rabbiting on, but I was hardly listening. The Israeli guy - you couldn't help be aware of him. He was hard as nails. Next morning he set off for Angelus, another big hike and I thought: *He's looking for something, trying to find it in the next sunset.*"

"I went over Travers Saddle that day and met another Israeli. I mentioned this guy and

the Israeli had met him and knew all about him. *He is a major in the Israeli Army. He has seen some action. He has seen some things.* He thought the guy had done some killing."

Stu was up first thing in the morning. He'd fixed the track, the hut, the loo, and now he was more or less getting the sunrise in order.

"I'm figuring today will be one of the better days," he called. "You'll love it. It's just full on."

"Hmmmnn." The last weather forecast had said good until Thursday. Today was Thursday.

We made some rapid decisions. I decided not to climb Franklin. The weather was starting to look doubtful, and I wanted to move on. Stu wouldn't climb Franklin either. He'd come over Waiau Pass with me, then loop back via Thompson Saddle to the D'Urville River valley, where he had three huts to check.

We climbed away from the pocket-sized Blue Lake to the serious Lake Constance, one valley higher up. The weather was starting to break, and we donned parkas, beanies and gloves, pushing through tussock and Spaniard high above the lake, then down a crumbling path to the lakeshore. Stu came up from behind, holding a rag he'd found.

"Is this yours mate?"

"Oh - thanks."

Snatching at it. Holding it tight. Tattered and torn. Almost lost. My lucky blue hanky. We went on, past the lake. Two ducks flew down the draw, and we came to a sign that pointed sideways into the steep scree: Waiau Pass.

We climbed into cloud. Sporadic waratahs marked the route for a time, but visibility was down to 50 metres or so, and we soon lost them. The southerly was blowing, with gusts strong enough to shift our entire bodies sideways on the slope. We soon lost all sense of a trail, and came finally to a dead halt against a vertical rock buttress. We crouched in the lee of it, consulting the map. If we followed the rock up, we'd hit the pass - and we did, hauling slowly up the final yards, slinging off the packs.

Waiau Pass was the highest point yet on Te Araroa's proposed route - 1,870 metres. In my mind's eye I was to have sat down here, to have eaten cheese and salami, to have gazed with deserving satisfaction around the top third or so of the South Island.

Not. It was mid-summer, cold, and strangely dark.

"This is just a brief southerly front. It'll clear," said Stu. "The view from here has to be epic, and all we have to do is wait."

I waited, hood up, back to the wind like a cattle beast, the southerly soughing in the crags. Stu was off exploring, finding a snow bank, and returning full of energetic optimism.

"It's a lot lighter now than 20 minutes ago. It's clearing - look at that!"

"Stu - I have to say I think it's getting worse."

"You said you're writing about the trail route. If you can't see the view, how're you going to describe the pass?"



"When I come to write this bit, I'll just say Waiau Pass is considerably more beautiful than I have been able to describe. Let's get going."

We rock-hopped down the ridge on the far side, Stu calling back over his shoulder amidst the cold blast of the southerly and the streaming cloud: "Everything condenses into one thing. Coming down the ridge and taking this all in. It's so good. It's so simple."

Then I found him stopped, one hand symbolically cupped.

"Listen! Insects."

A high glistening, right up there in the register where you can't quite tell if its tinnitus or small things rubbing their cuticles. Something other than ourselves - though we never saw quite what - lived and breathed on Waiau Pass.



Then we had to concentrate. The descent got steep. The iron waratahs drooped as if wilted by intense heat but in fact bent by winter snow avalanche. The ridge fell away, and I had a chance to see a South Island tramping tradition at work. After we'd followed one false ridge, and after we'd re-established the route by going back to the last waratah then searching out the next one 100s of metres away, Stu took time out to build a helpful cairn, intermediate between the two track markers.



We dropped under the cloud at last, then hit the bushline again and came on through low thickets of celery pine to a campsite beside the Waiau River. We lit a fire and cooked up a stew that absorbed the last of the sticky vegetables.

We talked some more around the fire. Stu Bennett had held down previous jobs at the Rugby Hall of Fame, and as a chauffeur at Sky City. He'd got the summer job as an honorary warden in

Nelson Lakes National Park after a couple of years trying against fierce competition. When the holiday stint finished, he'd go back to Lincoln University where he was studying for a degree in Recreation Management in Parks.

In the morning we shook hands, and I off-loaded a bit of dehydrate.

"You'll have enough food? You'll be okay?"

"A bag on my back, and everything I want is here."

He went back to play in the tops, then to patrol down through the D'Urville Valley, and I went on down the Waiau Valley, headed directly south.

## #10 The St James Walkway

*Te Araroa gets a bovine escort, and passes a memorial cairn*



The wind had died to a zephyr, but yesterday's southerly had produced a clear day. The jagged skyline either side of the valley was as sharp as if cut from blue cardboard.

I boulder-hopped down the Waiau, more a cataract here than a river, stopped for a cup of tea at Caroline Bivouac, then went on.



The sun was a gong. The yellow grassland spread wide and the river began to braid. The few things that moved emphasized the bright stillness of it all - the shadow across my path of a bird high overhead, a tramper on the far side of the river headed at high speed up the valley, too distant to hail, his hiking sticks working away.

On the valley sides, I saw swathes of ghost forest, dead trees, killed by slowly shifting scree. The more active rock slides remained bare, spilling right through the forest and out onto the shimmering grasslands like a big grey paw out-thrust into the living room.

I smelled cattle. I saw a red shotgun shell. I was walking through St James Station, but I'd rung the station beforehand to seek permission, and it was fine by them so long as I kept clear of the farmhouse. I hiked on at speed. The grassland was studded with matagouri, a spiky savannah-like shrub, suggesting zebras and rhinos, and the moment Africa crossed my mind I saw them: big brown and white beasts - uh, Herefords.

At first they were few, and they simply watched me go by, occasionally wheeling

heavily away, as cattle do, but further down I came up to a big herd. By then I was following a 4WD track, and the herd blocked the route, more secure en masse, curious, heads lolling, allowing me little more than elbow room across their green-spattered dust.

It was a big valley sloping south. It had the dynamic of a wide softly-waving highway, and the cattle were attuned to that. Twenty or so of the young bloods decided to act as escort, keeping pace 40 metres out like outriders in a motorcade, weaving through the matagouri, kicking up their heels and egging each other on for a good half hour beside me.

I waded the Ada River, spotted the marker posts of the St James Walkway at the base of the next hill, and set off down the walkway. The sun was declining by then, but I hurried on. I wanted to get to a particular place before the light vanished, something for Noel.

In 2000, Noel Sandford was in charge of Te Araroa's Waikato River trail construction. He'd joined the gang late, after another supervisor pulled out with pneumonia, and on the day he joined, we worked three hours then sat down for smoko. We talked rivers and tramping and I told the story of an American I'd met who'd tried to cross Shiels Creek in Westland when it was running, lost his footing, his pack, his jacket, a fair amount of flesh off his legs and was hospitalised four days at Greymouth Hospital.

Noel said:

"I believe if you die doing something you love, then that's the best way to die."

I looked at him. It wasn't quite the coda for a story where the tramper survived, but the gang recognised a solemn wisdom and everyone nodded agreement.

Then:

"My wife was a keen tramper. She got swept into the Henry River while crossing a side-stream. There was a flash flood. The whole bottom of the stream shifted. She was just this far from my outstretched hand."

A handsbreadth.

I crossed the Henry River on a suspension bridge. The track followed along upriver, and then I came to a stream and a small cairn with the inscription:

"Love springs eternal."





On January 4 1994, Noel and Diana tramped through to this point. It was snowing on Jervois Peak out to the east. The stream was in flood. Should they go upstream to cross? The two went up for a look, but decided the existing ford was best. They linked to each other's pack straps and began to feel their way across.

The water began suddenly to rise further, and the two abandoned the crossing. They edged back. The stream was pulsing, a flash flood phenomenon, and the stream-bed shifted beneath their boots. Noel saw a pressure wave, and pitched forward onto it, hoping for, and finding, the big rock beneath. He was then the anchorman, the two remained linked, Diana using her husband's supporting arm and shoulder to edge back to the bank. The water ran fast there, but shallow, just over boot height. That was his clear image. She was safe. He let go.

"I'm slipping," said Diana and fell backwards.

A handsbreadth away.

Run to the river. Noel Sandford had one last sight of his wife, apparently packfloating, caught briefly by an eddy in the Henry. She was smiling. One of the Sandford daughters, a doctor, took particular notice of this description and told her father later: The reason she was smiling - you shouldn't worry that anything more could have been done - Mum was already dead of coldwater shock.

*A sign near the cairn said: This bridge was donated by N. Sandford in April 1994 with the permission of the station owners, and the help and encouragement of DOC Hanmer and RNZAF No 3 Squadron.*



A piece of dressed timber was lodged in rocks just down from the ford, and I went down and retrieved it, sliding it into a jumbled pile of timber on the far bank. Noel, a skilled carpenter, had come back and bridged the stream. He'd bought two hard-wood stringers weighing 1.5 tonnes, and the same Iroquois that had searched for his wife in the Henry River dropped them on-site.

He prefabricated the bridge superstructure, brought it up by 4WD to the far side of the river, floated it all across, then bolted and coach-screwed everything together.

Then came the death plunge, in 1995, of 13 polytechnic students and a DOC field centre manager on an observation deck at Cave Creek. The Department ordered engineering reports on all its structures. It set out new construction standards for the New Zealand back country.

Minimum deck-widths would be 800 mm, the bridge deck-width was 750 mm. Deck slats would be 40 mm thick, the bridge slats were 25 mm. No structural support timber would be notched. The hand-rail uprights were notched into the hardwood stringers. Safe, but incorrect. DOC demolished the bridge.

Just a bridge. Just a cairn, but eloquent with love and mourning. I knelt there briefly, shut my eyes and told someone I didn't know that from what I'd been told her three daughters were doing very well in their chosen careers.



I went on to Anne Hut, arriving in darkness. I'd walked over 35 kilometres that day, and the hut was wonderfully warm and hospitable. A couple of sleepy trampers whom I'd woken told me to help myself to the water they'd had boiling on the log-burner. Lorraine and Trevor Proffit were from Christchurch, he an ex-dairy farmer, now working in a tannery, she a nurse with Southern Cross.

We walked out over the Anne Saddle next day, to the Lewis Pass highway. At Boyle Village I drew a mark beside the cattlestop and accepted the Proffit's offer of a lift to

Hanmer Springs.

A motel room. A hot shower. Real food. A beer. White sheets. A soft bed. Such are the joys.

## #11 Lewis to Arthurs Pass

*Maps and maggots, Weetbix and poison*

The rain came on, and through the windows of the Hope Kiwi Lodge I studied cattle. A few cow and calf duos wandered in the wide meadows, but one black steer just stood there, neither grazing nor, aside from a slowly-working jaw, moving.

I read the track description from pages I'd torn from *101 Great Tramps in New Zealand*. The Harpers Pass route was an old classic, used by Maori as a greenstone trail, by gold diggers and stockmen to cross the alps from east to west. The authors warned that three difficult river crossings waited at the southern end of the 5 to 7-day journey - the Taramakau, the Otehake and the Otira. The book advised crossing the Taramakau above where "the Otehake River thunders out . . ." then to cross the Otehake itself.

If it rained, you could get badly stuck. I spread my three maps onto the floor of the Hope Kiwi Lodge so the whole 76 km route was on display. At 1:50,000 the route was 1.5 metres long, and here was the thin blue ink-line of the Otehake, three or four days tramp away. I went to the window and gazed out. Clouds drifted through the valley and the rain had really set in. This was exactly the weather that would swell the Otehake. Blue ink merely. *Thundering* blue ink.

Symbolic thought. The Neanderthals were great toolmakers and successfully survived for millions of years in their low-brow unsymbolic way before yielding in a series of massacres in Southern Spain to the swarming Cro Magnons. The single advantage of the Cro Magnon proto-humans, so the theory goes, was their capacity to manipulate symbols, to use pictures and language.

I gazed out the window at the steer, still standing in the rain, still in exactly the same place, still chewing. No mere beast could read the maps spread out on the floor behind, could envisage the thin blue tracery of a river 60 kilometres distant as a raging, no the word was *thundering* torrent, could even remotely understand my own sense of arrested panic in this wet but entirely peaceful landscape.

The poor bastards.

I lit candles and read a novel I'd picked up in Nelson, Don DeLillo's *The Names*. Outside it kept raining. I got up and shone my torch on the steer in the meadow. Luminous eyes. Still standing in exactly the same spot. I focussed the Maglite beam, but couldn't make out - black against black - whether the jaw was still moving.



In the morning the rain had eased and I set off on a 4WD track through the Kiwi River Valley meadows, picking up from beside the track, a fashionable black leather pouch with a blue rubber ring drawing it closed at the top. *Huh - someone dropped a - what the hell is it? - a purse?*

I admit to thinking that. I admit to squeezing it to see if there was any small change inside, or, since it seemed a slightly counter-culture item, any dak, and it was the slight squashiness of it, the sudden realisation that the hairiness was no fashionable conceit, no *accessoire brut*, but the original beast itself, that sent me recoiling one way, and the thing looping the other, to land on the road with a soft thud.

The poor bastards.



I spotted Lake Sumner from a high viewpoint, went on down and past, then up the Hurunui River Valley. The grasslands opened wide and I sweated upon an endless plain for hours before crossing the river on a suspension bridge.

Symbols and signs. The notice said Hurunui Hut -10 minutes, but maybe after a 20 km day I was just tired. I counted off the seconds. Each time I got to 60, I'd extend a finger. When both hands were splayed, I started again, and the forest track still wound away uphill. *Some bloody DOC guy, fit and fresh, dropped into the hut by chopper, bounding downhill, ticking off the minutes, hammering the sign into the ground.* It's never the distance itself, but the symbols of actual distance, never the time it takes, but the symbols of the time it should take. These are the things that measure your shortfall. At the end of a long tramping day, these are the things that make you groan.

Someone had left a window open at the hut, and blowflies zoomed around. Someone had left a bacon sandwich folded into a plastic bag with a happy note: 'Bob - Enjoy'. I'm no forensic entomologist, but from the 5 mm length of the maggots inside I estimated Bob was around two days late. I threw his lunch out the door, and got on with my own dinner.

The maps showed a hot pool right ahead, but I was forewarned by the exasperated entries in the hut book, written by trampers who'd failed to find it. Next day the first trampler I'd seen en

route strode towards me, using a tall tube as a hiking stick, and I stopped him.



"Oh sure, I camped there last night," said Geoff Gilbert from Montana. "You won't miss it if you stay on the trail, but the gnats are real bad."

"Sandflies. It doesn't pay to stop for long beside the river," I was already slapping at my legs where the namu were burying their mouthparts. I nodded at the tube. "Fishing?"

"Right. Know anything about this river? So far I've had shit luck. Maybe it gets better as it goes along. Or" he said thoughtfully, "maybe I'm a bad fisherman."

I smelled the hot spring. The trail passed a wet rock face blackened and streaked by minerals, and the overhanging beech stained orange by sulphur. It was fairly hard to miss. I climbed up to the pool and stripped off for a soak. Just my head above water, and namu by the hundred homing in.

Past No 3 hut, and then across a walk-wire over Cameron Stream. The trail wound on through beech forest, long vales of colonnaded space and suspended green confetti, quiet except for the occasional glassy inflection of a bellbird, and then a forest hum. I tip toed cautiously past a busy commerce of wasps streaming in and out of a mossy hole in the ground. I went on up a diminishing valley, paused at the bivvy for a bite to eat, then boulder hopped up the river towards the saddle.





I hauled out by its tail a shiny brown eel-like creature in the river and it turned out to be a leaf, but I wasn't disappointed. *Dracophyllum*. I looked about, found it and grinned. *Dracophyllum traversii* is a strange Seuss-like tree with separate urchin heads of leaves. The trees are always surrounded by their own profuse moult of long slick leaf litter, and it's odd, but I've always felt actual affection for them, the way you might with an animal.



The vegetation changed dramatically. A wide variety of plants and trees crowded the track as I made my way up to Harpers Pass. Mountain holly, the Mt Cook Lily, not a lily at all in fact, but a giant buttercup, tree fuchsia, the turpentine shrub, mountain pine. Then at 960 metres altitude and with surprising ease I crossed the main divide. Far below, the Taramakau River

glinted and wound into the western distance.



I came down on a steep slip-riddled track, crossed the Taramakau on a swing bridge, then pushed my way along a rough trail, through bush growth and beds of stinging Ongaonga in the gullies. Heavy cloud was massing in the hills behind as I reached Locke Stream Hut at 7 pm, kicked off my boots and went in.

Cornucopia ! The place looked like a supermarket.

Weetbix, the 66 biscuit 1 kg pack, two of them. Bell Tea, a 200-bag packet. Anchor skim milk, Moro bars, Crispie biscuits, muesli bars, canned fish fillets, clover honey, raspberry jam, butter, crunchy peanut butter, colby cheese, edam cheese, white toast bread, macaroni elbows, cans of soup, carrots, Budget loo paper.

More supplies yet were packed away in plastic barrels. LPG bottles were stashed about, a four-ring burner sat on the bench.

These guys had come in by chopper.

On the table was *NZ Guns and Hunting*. The magazine's cover slash said: "Brush busting - When Bullets Hit Twigs."

These guys were hunters.

There was a book on one bunk: *Kahawai Cowboys - Kiwi Fishing Tales* by Mark Goodson.

And fishers.

On another bunk was *The Holy Bible*, and *The Reason Why?* by R.A. Laidlaw, founder of the Farmers Trading Company. The cover quoted Billy Graham's praise of Laidlaw as "One of the Great Christian Laymen". It said: "More than 20 million copies of this booklet have now been published in more than 30 languages."

I made myself a hot chocolate. I read DeLillo. The door opened. Three men came in, dropped their packs and got straight into boiling water for tea - Martin Cleland from Whataroa, Kelly

Glass from Harihari, Noel Glass from Hokitika.

"Been hunting?"

"No," said Martin Cleland. "We're tree-huggers."

"Oh?"

"Mensuration," said Martin. "We mensurate." He cocked an eye at me, daring me to do the joke and repeated, "Men-sss-uuu-rate - what are you reading?"

I showed him. "If you want context for the terrorist attack in America, read DeLillo." I flicked the pages . . . "Huge crowds circling the holy rock at Mecca, obscure hatreds, spies, suspicion, Americans working in Greece and the Middle East, assassination, it's a novel but it kind of gets the atmosphere - what DeLillo calls the world hum, planetary fear."

"I've got a mate in the States who's been yapping at me on the phone," said Kelly. "It's a pain getting around the States at the moment. It's better to drive 800 km than to fly."

"Metal detectors going off," said Martin "I was going from Christchurch to Waitotara. I thought I was putting all my hi-jack offensive weapons on the table - the slashers the machetes, and then I'm looking at my car keys with the little knife attached. Where do you stop? And then I trigger the alarm anyway. Step this way Sir. I've got my hands up, I get patted down, and it's my boots with the steel toes in them."

"So Geoff," said Noel, looking me in the eye. "You think that Western civilisation might be coming to an end?"

They were bushmen. They'd know what the weather was going to do, and I asked them. Martin crossed to a radio on the wall, humming to himself - "The Taramakau - the Terrible Cow" He called up DOC's Arthurs Pass base, and it crackled back. *It's clagged in around the base here and we've got a southwester. The cloud is increasing tonight and tomorrow - we could get rain.*

Noel sensed my worry, turned to me and said: "It takes a lot of rain to bring the rivers up when it's this dry."



The gang measured trees in specific plots, information that would be run through a computer programme to gauge the health of the forest overall. They were under contract to DOC.

The three told tales of growing up and working in the bush, the saw mills, dangerous work, but good money. They'd lost jobs as the conservation pressure groups closed the commercial

forests. In its first term, the new Labour Government of 1999 had responded to the pressure and put a deadline on Timberlands the government SOE. All rimu logging would stop by April 2002. The three knew the ironies.

"The biggest logs that ever came out of the Okarito Forest," said Martin, "came out - guess when?"

"Before the Labour Government?"

"No. Last year under Labour. It was just bloody amazing. It was the last big bash. Timberlands had a contract. If it didn't supply its quotas it was up for compensation claims from Westco Lagan, and they took trees out of the forest that would make you cry.

"They had to come up with huge volume from somewhere, more than they could take out under the West Coast Accord, which set sustainable volumes. So they changed the harvesting regime from volume to stems. Twenty stems per hectare, and they changed the DBH diameters. Out they came. We were calling them Helen trees in the end. We were watching these transports going past with bowls of trees that were a couple of metres through. Rimu, and I was thinking: Where are the protesters now?"

The conversation took a swing through 1080, the poison that gets broadcast in the New Zealand bush by the Animal Health Boards and DOC, to control possums. The fight was on there too, to stop it.

"It's like a .270 rifle," said Martin. "Powerful. A great weapon in the right hands at the right time and at the right target. But right now it's like someone's firing on semi-automatic up the main street of Auckland.

"I used to hate politics," he said, "but I got dragged into it - it's like a vortex. We're too few people too far from the political centre. There's 34,000 people in Westland."

"We're outvoted by all youse lot up there," said Kelly.

"We're beleaguered," said Martin. "They say tourism is the answer. They want to put a road from Haast to Fiordland - a wilderness road, no development - but any government has the ability to change legislation at a whim. First you get the carpark, then the ablution block, next thing someone has set up a bungy, then the tearooms."

Everyone fell silent, contemplating the sinister hum of tourists in the South Island.

"We're going to have to move to the Chathams," said Martin.

"We're West Coasters," said Kelly.

"If we kark out in the bush just gut us and leave us there," said Noel.

In the morning I waded the river and went on down the long Taramakau Valley. There'd been rain during the night, and the weather still threatened. Winds gusted from every direction, tugging the lucky hanky on my Leki now this way, now that.

There was no marked track, but as I headed sometimes over grassy terraces, sometimes into

bush to avoid getting bluffed by the river, I was struck as I had been in the Waiau Valley, by the invisible companionship of a thousand previous trampers.

On an unmarked route, you solve the problems of travel your own way, but surprisingly often as you come on, a discernible track opens under your feet. Others have made the same decisions. There's a comfort about it, and I was always careful to walk where others had, on that faint pressed grass where others would also follow. A nascent trail.

I crossed the Taramakau beyond Kiwi Hut, and awaited the thunderer.

The Otehake had dug itself a trench. Its banks were jumbled rock and the danger of it was the channel, not broad and flat like the Taramakau, but U shaped, faster running. People have died here - once you're down in a river like this, its hard to regain footing. I adjusted the Lekis. I prowled up and down to spot the best cross-point. I waded in, and the water rushed to the top of my thighs, unceasing and hypnotic as I stared down at it, sliding each boot slowly to its next stable footing.

Mid-way across I stopped and raised my head to look. It's a tactic. The river stops rushing then, your view is suddenly wide, your balance confirmed. A plane of liquid light stretches back and disappears into the forest. The river ripples, has small standing pressure waves, the light bounces off it. It is beautiful, both motile and still. It is just a little awesome, but not fearsome. Not today at least.

I tramped on down, crossed the Otira, and came out on the Arthurs Pass Highway.

## #12 Arthurs Pass to Hamilton Hutt

### *In the footsteps of Supermen*

The DoC brochure describes the Deception River route through Arthurs Pass as a two or three day tramp, with an overnight stay at Goat Pass Hut, but the best of the Speights Coast to Coast athletes do the entire 26 kilometres in one hour 30 minutes.

I tramped up Deception. Ninety Coast to Coast runners had come through just a week before, and the trail was plain enough. Dusty indentations signalled good river crosspoints, bent branches suggested a diversion into bush.

The athletes come through this jumbled terrain at speeds that could win an international marathon, and I gazed at the worn patches, high up on the rock where the runners had sprung from boulder to boulder. Paused in brief envy as you might, watching the pow-pow ascent of monkeys up those tree branches at the zoo. Good skills, but there's no need to be truly envious - these animals simply belong to a different species.

I climbed upriver towards the pass. The going got steep, the grey boulders got bigger, and intent on finding footholds and handholds on the dull stone I forgot the river. Bent over from the climb, panting then recovering myself - it was with surprise that I saw before me smooth river-water scything into a pool, saw the pool populous with thousands of silver bubbles. Or, brought up short under the spout of a waterfall, I was suddenly surprised by the colour there, a blue I'd never seen before. You don't easily describe colour, it just is, but I named it spirit blue. The river fell downhill through its boulders, and from around entirely blank corners offered up these small visions, dropped into a grey world seemingly from somewhere beyond, from another, and utterly pure, planet.

I ate lunch on the hut verandah at Goat Pass, then dropped down a boardwalked trail to the Mingha River, followed it down, crossed the Bealey River, and was out at Klondike Corner after nine hours. Just a kilometre up the highway was an AA sign, the yellow diamond-shaped one that warns motorists, by the appropriate black silhouette, that children might be on the road ahead, or stock might be, or as the silhouette on this sign suggested, moas might be. I went up the drive to the Bealey Hotel. Three concrete moas grazed in the yard, moa eggs sat above the bar, and beside the kitchen servery was a Press billboard. *Moa Report Genuine says Freaney.*

In 1993, the hotel owner Pat Freaney and some mates spotted a moa in the Craigieburn Range. The sighting was backed up by a blurry photo. Freaney was away climbing in Patagonia when I came through, but the kitchen staff were happy to consider my questions on the story,s various loose ends and give the default answer on Paddy,s behalf -

„Being an Irishman, I don,t think Paddy has to explain that.%“

Next day after a short walk down from the Bealey Hotel, I turned into the metalled drive leading to Gerry McSweeney,s up-market Wilderness Lodge, and the start there of the Cass-Lagoon Saddle two day track.

On my way in I saw twelve sheep tightly grouped and quite motionless at the edge of a grassy terrace. It was a tableau. One animal with curled horns stood proud within the group, gazing outwards. Others gazed out too, but their eyeline was lower, they were recumbent animals, their hooves draped over the lip of the terrace. Others again, perhaps seven of them, acted more or less as fill, their heads buried in the middle of this huddle, and only their grey



hindquarters sticking out.

The sculptor Henry Moore once called sheep „animate stones.“ Agreed. This solid and soft pantheon was a living social realist sculpture, heroic in its own view no doubt, and I agreed with that too. I hurried on, upwards for hours through beech forest, across tussock and huge views of Arthurs Pass, to Lagoon Saddle, then began a long descent alongside the Harper River, towards Hamilton Hut.



Sunday trampers came plodding uphill towards me, more than I,d seen on any of my previous Southern trails. I did my usual vox pop and noted an Irish woman, an Englishman, 3 Israelis, 3 Australians, 12 Christchurch trampers, including a father and his two boys, five women, and Leo Spring who summed it all up - „Last night, the hut was a zoo.“



The hut at the junction of Hamilton Creek and the Harper River is known to trampers as the Hamilton Hilton. It was designed in the early 1980s by New Zealand Forest Service architects. The then Canterbury Conservator of Forests Joe Levy and the Craigieburn Forest Park Advisory Board - lay people who were passionate about this area - saw it through.

I arrived at the hut across a high walk-wire over the creek. The peaks of the Craigieburn Range were just beginning to glow above a shadowed valley, and I sat awhile on the wide verandah, looking out over river terraces at the view.

A clothes line with red and yellow plastic pegs attached looped overhead, and the clear corrugated roofing sheets allowed plenty of light through. Sandfly screens banged shut behind me as I went indoors. A huge central beam of cedar ran the length of the hut, supporting exposed rafters and skylights. The interior was warm with walls of natural wood, and dominated at its centre by a grey knobbled colossus that rose from floor to ceiling - a freestanding fireplace of riverstone, big enough to swallow whole logs. A woodburner was now installed in the hearth, its flue disappearing up into the vaster original chimney. A coal scuttle stood beside the fireplace, and suspended above it on pulleys was a clothes drying rack. On the mantlepiece lay four Readers Digests no more than 4 years old, and one Doris Lessing novel.

I inspected the kitchen and eating area - a stainless steel bench, stainless steel billy, pots, a

full range of cutlery and candles. Bench seats laid with comfortable squabs addressed the four tables. A deckle-edged mirror hung on the wall and the hut was equipped with radio and a schedule for calling up weather forecasts. Then there were the 20 bunks, six of them set in tiers within the open plan living space, the rest sequestered in a separate room.

I finally got round to the hut book, leafed through it and came across a drawing that seemed somehow right for this extraordinary hut. It was titled *ÆSuperWarden.*,



„How I imagine this Alf fellow,% the artist had written, „after reading the comments in this book.%

Alf stood there with a fishing rod in one hand, a rifle in the other, and at his feet a container for hut fees and a box of cleaning fluids. The briefs, the body stocking, the big chest with a bold A on it, the light winking off the teeth - Alf was Marvel material, a superhero.

I leafed back through the book.

It began in January 2001. That was before the ascension, when it was still possible to voice some meagre criticisms of Alf. Gain Riddell of Scotland had written -

„The most hospitable hut in New Zealand thanks to Alf - could do without his late night possum shooting though.%

The next contributor was more straightforward, foreshadowing more accurately what was to come -

„Alf „ he wrote simply, „is a great man.%

„Enjoyed Alf,s new trail through the windfalls,% wrote a third. „Great little walk up to the tarn.%

So it went, all separate entries, all praising separate skills -

An American - „Fantastic stay thanks largely to ace fishing guide Alf!%

An Irishman - „Nice relaxing stay. Boots sorted by Alf the shoerepairman.%

A Salt Lake City trumper - „Great hospitality Alf. Loved the trout cordon bleu.%

A Bellingham USA trumper - „Thanks for the sausage Alf%

This from a Los Angeles woman - „Alf rocks.%

Overseas trampers were impressed, but had they encountered simply a Kiwi good keen man?

I kept flicking the pages until I could assess what the locals thought, and came to an entry from Jane Piper and Simon Round of Christchurch dated 24/02/01 -

„Impressive - the cleanest and tidiest hut we,ve ever stayed in thanks to Alf.%

It happens to actors, it happens in Hollywood, but it can happen in any occupation, that a person gains lustre and may suddenly cross a threshold beyond their peers, become transcendent, iconic, half-fiction, uprisen upon the approval of an admiring public. It can happen to anyone. It happened to Alf in the two days between 24/02/01 and 26/02/01. The language changed -

„Have now met the legendary Alf,% said an entry from an Environment Canterbury couple.

And on March 3 - „Awesome hut. Thanx Alf, you,re a legend.%

Then, a long silence until, on 12/05/01 Lucas Habib from Canada asked tentatively -

„Will Alf appear?%

But Alf appeared only once more. In October he was briefly thanked, though it wasn,t clear for what, and then he disappeared from the hut record.

I went out and explored. A hand-written sign was stuck in the ground beside a hole. The hole, said the sign, was for a new 3,000-litre toilet, and no-one was to throw rubbish in it.

The sides of the hole had slumped, and there was leaf litter in it. The sign was faded too. It all looked about a year old - Alf,s work, of course it was.

I went back to the hut, cooked a meal and waited for some other tramper to show up. Waited instinctively perhaps, for Alf, but no-one came and I had the Hilton Hotel that night entirely to myself.

## The South - Section 3: Arthurs Pass - Tekapo

### #13 Musing on the Mountains

Next morning I set off down the Harper River, slightly surprised to find a Department of Conservation sign that pointed downriver to Lake Coleridge. When I'd done my trail report, no-one had mentioned that this was a recognised route to the lake.

I waded and re-waded the river to bypass bluffs, past one strange formation that looked like the Sacrada Familia, the knobbed Catholic spires of that strange and perpetually unfinished Barcelona cathedral stretching up and away toward nature-worship. Gaudi had passed this way.



But mostly it was river terrace leading back finally to farmland and I stopped for lunch on the tussocky flanks of a 1,000-metre hillock, The Redoubt.

I sliced off big chunks of salami. I ate crackers and cheese. I drank the rainwater from Hamilton hut. There were big peaks all around and I laid out the map.

This is one of the great pleasures of South Island tramping. The country is so open and the views so clear that when you lay out the map it's an uncanny contraction of the real thing. You look down, and there it is, artificially small but accurate. You look up and there it is life-sized and even more accurate. At first you just look to the main mountains. Mt Olympus here, Mt Gargarus there. Then you start to study the flanks of individual mountains. The map shows the

contour lines of the mountain nicely separated here, but fearfully bunched there. You look up and see the same bits of mountain, nicely sloping here, but fearfully steep there.



And the names - it was an idle game sitting here in the sun, entirely relaxed, chewing on salami, drinking cool rainwater, and deciding whether to quarrel with the pioneers. Olympus ? No way. An overreaction to a rather ordinary 2000-metre peak. Gargarus - a good powerful name for the big, solitary brooder that rose slowly west of the river. The Spurs, sharp and rowelled, The Knuckles, yes suitably knobbed, and Mt Ida seemed, with its strong but slightly complex ridging to

suggest faithful love. The distinctly conical Mt Fitzwilliam should however, I decided as I packed up again, be renamed The Cone.

The Redoubt was on Ryton Station land. I'd rung the station and had permission to come through on a 4WD track, and by late afternoon I was in a \$20-a-night lodge beside the farmhouse, peering into the cold store at five skinned sheep carcasses on hooks.

I was waiting for the station owner, Mike Meares, who'd headed out on a 4WD safari, and I grabbed a beer from his fridge and took out the battered copy of 'Te Araroa - South Island Trail.'

I'd included as an appendix the original South Island trail design done in 1970 by the Scenic Trails Sub Committee of the Federated Mountain Clubs. The FMC route and Te Araroa's route both came down the Harper River, and both turned sharply east here. The FMC report and my report recommended tracking east some 40 km, to cross below the confluence of the Wilberforce and Rakaia Rivers on the bridge that spanned the Rakaia Gorge.

There were compelling reasons for this. The Wilberforce and the Rakaia are both braided rivers, but the Wilberforce is steep and the Rakaia's channels simply carry a lot of water. Both rivers rise and fall unpredictably, and are perhaps all the more dangerous because they are crossable sometimes. But a trampler who crosses the Wilberforce above Lake Coleridge must then tramp south-west along the bank of the Rakaia some 20 km before reaching a safe ford. On that long strip of river gravel the trampler is beyond roads, or farmhouses. Rainfall in the mountains can make the river uncrossable at the ford anyway, and trap you in the open between the alps and the river.

I went up to the farmhouse in the evening and talked to Meares. I told him we wanted a tramping route across his station, because a tramping route that crossed the Wilberforce and then the Rakaia, would almost certainly lead to tramping deaths.

"Yeah - you can't have them friggin around the big rivers," said Meares. "It's not beginners' country."

He'd been culling Canada geese once and was crossing the Wilberforce with mates, all of them hanging onto a pole for strength of numbers. Next thing the river took them. His mates were swept immediately onto sills but Meares went on and for the first 100 metres, he was still clutching the pole and laughing. The river was sweeping him along, up on his toes. After 300 metres he was afraid - "You can touch the bottom, but you can't stop yourself, you can't grip. It's one man against a Crusaders scrum. You're fighting to get a footing. And after about 3 or 400 yards, by jingo you lose your strength."

Mike and Karen Meares managed the 14,500-hectare station, running 8,000 sheep, but for 10 years they'd been diversifying into tourism. The station did skiing, skating, 4WD safaris and self-drive tours also walks. Besides the backpacker lodge, they had more expensive \$100 per night chalets with linen provided, breakfast, lunch and dinner.

I asked about Te Araroa. What were the possibilities for a through route here?

Anyone who stayed at Ryton got free access to the station's walks, said Meares and there was a walking route some 15 km from the head of Lake Coleridge down to the lodge where I was staying, and the chalets.



If trampers did not intend using the lodge or the chalets, Meares would expect them to stick to the legal road which also came down from the head of the lake. There was very little traffic, but there'd be no view over the lake.

Those choices sounded okay to me, but Meares stressed the lodge and the farm chalets were often full over summer, and any trumper would have to book. Ryton Station, said Meares, would reserve its options to change the agreement, dependent on how it seemed to be working.



I walked down by road, to the bridge, crossed it as a kayaking troupe did roll turns within the deep blue curve of the river, and went on up to Mt Hutt Station.



## #14 Roaring Bulls and Rhyolite Mountains

Keith Hood stood in a big shed amidst empty inoculation vials and the clunk of animals moving in a darkened stall as I came through.

A hiking route should be possible across his farm, he said, not on the farm race where he'd agreed I could walk, for there were frequent stock movements there, but further out on the property.

We left it at that, and went out to look at the hills. I was headed for the Mt Hutt toll gates on the Skifield Road and that meant going beyond the paddocks and sidling across the mountain.

"I haven't been out the back for a while, but the boys tell me it's a bit rough," said Hood. "It's quite scrubby up there. There's a bit of lawyer - "

"Yeh fine."

I went through a field of hinds. They were different from any animal I'd encountered before. Sensitive. They'd move as one, their speed giving them a flowing motion, then stop, look, all turned one way, ears up like fungus, then flee again, and in the contours of the paddock, disappear. Then there'd be a low rumble, and the line of the hill in front would be suddenly animate with a streaming line of ears, and then the whole herd would burst into the open higher up the paddock, wheel as one, and stop, and stare again.

Then I cut into the hills.

Always listen to a farmer. If he says the country is a bit rough, consider yourself warned. If lawyer even gets mentioned in that underslung farming way, then it won't be the lawyer you're used to, hanging occasionally across your path in the bush, occasionally raking you. No. This will be serious lawyer.

The slopes of Mt Hutt were covered with fern and tutu, a poisonous plant but not hard to move through. What was hard was the lawyer, rampant in amongst the fern, thick-stemmed with big thorns.

I'd taken a bearing on the toll gate but I couldn't hold the line. I simply went where it was easiest to go, up and down and around. The mountainside was creased with sharp little gullies where the bush was tall and stringy and there were drop-offs into streams slippery with moss. It was unpleasant travel but over long hours I made it through to a field below the toll-gate. A bluff stood between me and it. The stream at the foot of the bluff was thick with gorse and willow and blackberry, all of it netted with creeper and lawyer and I simply bounced off. I diverted to a fenceline, hopped over the gate and then I struck the bulls.

Throughout my South Island hike, I'd been trying to compose a walking song. Walking, with its separate but keyed rhythms of swinging arms, swinging legs, breathing and the soft percussion of footfalls seemed to me good for such composition. I had a mouthharp aboard, and I'd break it out around the huts sometimes, though to be honest I'd never got much past the old repertoire - E Papa, Po Karekare Ana, Move Cecil, Silent Night and Jugband Waltz.

Now I sidled alongside an electric fence in a paddock full of bulls. Everyone swung round to have a look at me. Someone began to bellow - MwwwwAAAAAH - began to stir everyone up,

and in that moment, I broke into a slow but entirely spontaneous song -

Let's all take it easy -

*MwwwwAAAAH*

Let's not be disturbed -

*MwwwwAAAAH*

Let's all live together -

*MwwwweeeEEEEaaah*

Here among the turds -

I ad-libbed and I'm not going to call it art, but I sang and I hoped I was singing in a soothing register.

I moved along the fenceline, but I kept facing the bulls and as I sang, my hands were palms out and oscillating slowly back and forth like a metronome. The musical form was dated, but this was not the time for hyper-rhythm, urban insults, four-letter words and the jabbing finger, this was pure Black and White Minstrel submission. Something that a bull might understand.

It was a big field. The song went on and on, and so did the bellowing, but I hoped the beasts could see, as I could, that we were locked into just such a primitive call and response as might figure in the pastoral scene of some popular musical. That it would be a shame to sunder something we'd achieved together by any silly chargings or tossings.

I came to the fence out of the bull paddock. It was four-wire electric. The difficult electric fences like this one you just jump onto so your feet are off the ground when you grab the wire. So long as you're not earthed, you're okay. That's the theory, and it's what I did. Jumped onto it, hoisted up on it, swung a leg over the top of it, balanced myself with one hand on a post ready for the jump down from it, and right then I got a shock that would have felled a bull. I dropped stonily off the fence, and lay on my back on the far side. The world receded into pale colours, then came back again. But I was out and free and on my way to Mt Somers.



View of Canterbury Plains from Mt Somers

Canterbury Mountain Radio painted a vividly cold picture of the South Island. Lewis Pass to Mt Cook, said the radio. Winds at 1,000 metres. Westerlies developing at 2,000 metres to 45 kph, freezing level 3,000 metres. Mt Aspiring to south of Lake Wakatipu, westerlies at 45 kph, freezing level 2,000 metres. Fiordland and Stewart Island, south-westerlies 45 kph about the tops, freezing level at 2,500 metres.

Zone by zone in its 7.30 p.m. daily sked, the radio gave the expected weather in the mountains and then gave a four-day forecast. The operator then went through over 20 call signs, and climbers, hunters, or trampers who'd linked to the service for safety called back.

I was tuned in on Pinnacle Hut radio on Mt Somers - I wasn't really part of the true alpine adventure, but it was fun to listen to the faint kiwi voices parked in crevices and huts on God knows what rock face. I was sub-alpine, though high enough to listen with interest to my own

local forecast. I had a view of the Canterbury Plains 1,000 metres below, and could look out the window at a couple of pleasingly huge and smooth rocks on the slopes behind the hut.



Mt Somers Stones

Pleasing, because sometimes over past weeks it had seemed to me that the whole interior of the South Island was falling down. South Island rock was grey, South Island rock was brittle, South Island rock was greywacke. It did not weather into interesting shapes, it just broke up into bits. Big bits, small bits, but basically just bits.

The plants that grew over and amongst these shingle slopes would sometimes gain enough foothold and sufficient density to be described as ground cover, but their foothold was always unstable. Slips or water runoff left long raw weals on every steep slope. The hills in their camouflage colours often looked wounded, laid open and grey, as if some madman had slashed at them up and down the valleys with a knife.

The elephantine standing stones on Mt Somers were weathered into powerful contours whose smooth pockets were now pooled with evening shadow, and the same slanting light of evening threw into relief the striated brown rock that lay in the bluffs behind. Mt Somers was an old volcano and the upwelling rock in these huge bluffs above the hut had writhed and whorled hot and viscous before it cooled into whorls now entirely cold, cracked and jointed.



Mt Somers waterfall

Next morning dawned clear and I went on over the saddle in brilliant weather. The air above the tussock was wonky with heat, copper butterflies flitted, waterfalls splashed from rocky rhyolite heights, and the grasshoppers did not sing so much as give off a fast flat and unmodulated ticking sound, like the automatic timer on a stove.

Mt Somers was a big volcanic carbuncle. The glaciated valleys on the far side of the saddle were aimed directly into the mountain's flank, but Somers had been staunch enough to turn the ice sheets aside.

I was going down now, along the lip of a canyon, past a neat little hut with one red door marked trampers, one red door marked shearers, past an old coal mine and down to a remnant of ancient silver beech forest that had escaped both Maori and settler burnings. The old trees were full of birdsong, and a bellbird dropped gradually down branch to branch until he

was staring at the through hiker from only a metre away.



I walked from Mt Somers up the Erewhon Road, and into increasingly lonely country. I entered a wide valley, passed Lake Clearwater and its holiday settlement of empty cribs, and went on into deserted splendour. The valley floor was smooth, with kettle lakes and erratic rocks, and whole kilometres of the valley sides were graded at the same angle, so that I seemed to walk up a grand avenue, whose architect was not nature's usual chaotic and democratic squabblers but a more grim and totalitarian figure, the Emperor Ice.

I came to the valley's edge, and the land dropped away suddenly to the Rangitata River Valley below. A filmy afternoon light was slanting into it, broken into rays by high peaks in the west. The valley was wide, brightly lit, criss-crossed by the shelter belts of Mt Potts station and enclosed by snowy mountains.

Across the river from here was Mesopotamia, once owned by New Zealand's most famous 19th century author, Samuel Butler. The old 19th century dray route into Mesopotamia came through this pass, and I could see, standing in this same place, how Butler might have beheld the lost valley and the closeted civilisation of his novel Erewhon.



I'd rung ahead to Mt Potts. The station had a lodge for skiers in winter and hikers and adventurers in summer. Marie-Claire Dewsbery ran the lodge. She'd met her husband Mark 'Speed' Dewsbery four years before when he was managing Mt Heron station. Where was she from? he'd asked politely and the adventurous Yorkshirewoman had told him - I don't have a location, I have a bag. Now here she was. Her background was in tourism and travel and she was setting up accommodation at Mt Potts Lodge, though if you wanted a meal, you had to book.

I was booked, and sat down to a Marie-Claire Dewsbery meal that night of tomato soup with beer bread, chicken kebab with Mediterranean char-grilled vegetables on cous cous, and chocolate almond cake with cream.

And coffee, do not forget the espresso coffee.

At the next table a biking safari group was also enjoying the food. Photographer Warren Jowett was rueing a lost telephoto lens, but the group was mainly talking climbing and kayaking and I heard John Leath say to Warren -

"A lot of people try to fight the water, but the flow there is 8 cumecs. That's 80 tonnes of water going past every second. You can't fight 80 tonnes, and I tell people relax and do what the water wants."

Well thanks. Next day I planned to cross the second-largest of the South Island braided rivers, the Rangitata, on foot.



## #15 The Wide River



Deep Stream was deep. It was the first of the Rangitata's channels, I knew there were another five kilometres of channel crossings in front and that I'd better get used to it, but this one looked too difficult and I followed it down.

Back at Mt Potts, Mark Dewsbery had drawn with his finger in the dust. Go past the superbin, cross the airfield, follow Deep Stream and just before Potts River you'll see a cairn and 4WD tracks. That's where you cross.

An angler held up to me, with two fingers hooked into its gills, a dangling silver trout. Water upwelled under my boots - seepage from the Potts River probably. There was no 4WD track, no cairn but I should cross Deep Stream before it was further swollen by the Potts River so I broke out the Lekis, adjusted them to height, undid the waist buckle on my pack and waded in. The bottom was slippery with brown algae. The water was very cold. and the water deepened until it was halfway up my

thighs and rising. For the first time in a South Island river, I heard the second voice - maybe, maybe we should go back here, find that cairn. I didn't, I kept on, it got no deeper and I hauled out the other side, my legs bright red with the cold.

I stood tightening my cap against the wind. I was out on the stony plain of the river now and I looked at the hummock that rose there. The ancient city of Edoras once crowded the shoulders of this small waterbound mountain, a walled city of Men, protected by the river's channels and steep flanks of land that rose 100 metres to its summit.



Nothing now remained - DoC had insisted that every block of polystyrene, every vehicle track should go. Wingnut Films dutifully restored the island, otherwise known as Mt Sunday, but you could see why they'd chosen it for a *Lord of the Rings* shoot. From this angle the high peaks, the perpetual snows, and the huge tumbled ice fields of the Garden of Eden Ice Plateau rose up behind, and the place was a vision. Erewhon, then Edoras - the Rangitata River Valley was a place where the imagination kept unreeling. Mine too. I'd dreamed about this river. Dreamed at Pinnacle Hut of bodies bumping against my legs. How safe was it as a tramping route?

When doing the trail report, I'd discussed all this with Mesopotamia's Sue Prouting. The consensus seemed to be - the crosspoint down-river of Mt Sunday and upriver of the Potts River junction was safe in summer - unless, that is, it wasn't.

Dust wraiths swept towards me, veered and vanished, then rose again. The river bed was as



dry and stony as the Gobi, so windblown by the gathering norwester that thistle seeds came flying towards me with the wavering speed of tracer bullets.

One by one I came up to the channels. What looked like just another line of stones would begin to ripple. One after another - I stopped counting after 30, but most were shallow splash-through sheets and none had the depth and speed of Deep Stream - until the last, which looked dangerous.



Beyond this 15-metres of swift glass was the line of willows Sue Prouting had described as the best entrypoint onto Mesopotamia. But first, cross your river - swift and deep with a scooped wave and a little frill above every submerged boulder. But braided rivers are good like that. I hiked upstream and came to a place where the channel shoaled and broke into two, then three.

I walked onto Mesopotamia along a 4WD track through yellow grassland, but the homestead was still an hour away.



My map showed a red star - Dr Sinclair's Grave. I parted the briar rose and peered at the concrete overcoat of a former colonial secretary, drowned in the river on March 26, 1861. I gazed at the poignant stones here of two young Prouting brothers. In 1972, Allan dead by car crash at age 18. In 1980, Peter dead by plane crash on the station's upper terraces at age 23. The rhymed poetry on the stones might have been sentimental outside this place - here it seemed like simple fact. These were mountain boys, laid to rest under starry skies in the land they loved.

"Get your feet wet?" Malcolm Prouting leaned out of his ute as I came up by the barn. He radioed through to his wife to say I'd arrived, and I went on up to a farm cottage.

Dr Sinclair's grave

That night I went up to see Malcolm. How much of a problem was the river to hikers?

"It's hard to predict it, but Speed could probably put the punters right on the day. It can come up quickly. Today - fine. Tomorrow? The northwester is here now and by tomorrow evening it'll be on the way up. Other times it can be bank to bank and dirty. It's boiling and brown and you watch trees go past like cars."

What were the chances of putting Mesopotamia on Te Araroa's route? Malcolm didn't seem wildly keen, but he acquiesced. I'd walked through on the DoC fishing access route, and that joined to a public road. Trampers could stay at the same cottage I'd booked into.

We stepped into a room and onto linoleum that'd been beautifully inlaid with a merino head. This was the animal around which the station revolved - the fleecies, the shearers, the shepherds, the head shepherds, the managers, the owners depended on it. The Proutings had been on Mesopotamia since 1943 but the room was stocked with photos and books that honoured a 142-year rollcall.

Butler was a little insecure within it. He'd bought the separate runs that became Mesopotamia in 1860, built up a herd of 3,000 sheep, sold up in 1863, and returned to England soon after. The Butler painting that hung on the wall here illustrated the problem. If you squinted, the background could be New Zealand, but the buildings were chalets. And that was Erewhon's problem. The woolsheds were there, also certain natives seen as pliable, the Rangitata and the Alps. Butler's considerable intellect inhabits this landscape though only to snipe at the various follies of Europe.

"Everyone goes on about Butler but most of the locals think he was an idiot," said Prouting. "He put his thatch on the wrong way on the roof."

"Erewhon," I said. "It's a famous book."

"Yeh. We have a copy here. A number of our people have tried to read it. They get to the first chapter and wonder what the hell it's about. We're people of the land really and not all that bullshit."

I arranged to meet Malcolm at the barn in the morning. I wanted to go round the station with him if the rain continued but if it dawned fine, I'd set out again.

I went to sleep to the sound of rain, but woke later to a tangled chorus that went on and on and on, and seemed strangely comforting. The dogs of Mesopotamia were howling at the moon.



Next morning I went down to the barn.

"The weather looks good," said Malcolm. "If I were you I'd be bolting."

## The South - Section 4: Lake Tekapo - Queenstown

### #16 Over the Two Thumb Range



I tramped up Forest Creek three hours and struck one bit of history - the remains of Samuel Butler's first hut at Mesopotamia. One small mound of stones and a plaque, fenced off with hurricane, and barbed wire.



Then a yellow ute with Bigger painted on the bonnet. I'd tramped five hours by then, every 4WD track had long ago tailed out and it seemed unlikely given all the crumble-edged channels of Forest Creek, that any vehicle might ever make it this far.

The ute was neatly parked below an old stone hut with 8-point antlers nailed above the door. I guessed at hunters, went up to the hut and stuck my head in - no-one home. I checked the longdrop too, at a glance for the thing was no more than a stand and a seat without walls. No-one home, and I went on

I was looking for a willow tree.

Ex Forest Service man Graeme Larcombe had once walked the same route I was walking now. Look for a willow, he'd said, and an old pack-horse track that zig zagged up the hill behind it, that led into





the Two Thumbs Range. The route required four station permissions and I'd rung three of them, and left an answerphone message with the fourth - I was walking with everyone's blessing, but sighted no willow.



Two rabbiters came down-river with a .22 rifle and a dog. They knew the willow. It was, said Max Crisp, unmissable. It looked odd, and beside it lay what had once been a hut and was now just half a wall and a pile of stones. The instruction was clear and good. Maybe Max could help me with another worry. I pointed back over his shoulder. The wind was stirring the dust, and powerful clouds were piling up.



"There's no rain in the air," said Max Crisp, "It'll be good for two or three days." And his younger sidekick, Jacob Barwick added -

"Straight up and down the valley like this is a good wind."

The good wind tugged at my lucky hanky for hours after I left them. The cloud thickened and the wind got stronger. Forest Creek narrowed into a gorge, the wind funnelled up the cliff face alongside, and a stone fell. It blind-tapped its way down and I stopped and watched it - the

first South Island stone I'd seen fall. Surrounded by as much fallen and water rolled stone as I had been, the thought had recurred - why, when I was spending whole days in zones that were full of it, did I not see or hear any rock fall? The wind gusted, and seven more pebbles fell off the cliff, more or less at my feet.

I pitched camp on a grassy terrace beside the willow. I ate quickly in the shelter of the stone wall, then hurried indoors. Darkness fell, the lightning flared and thunder rolled. I lay in the tent doing the maths. I'd been tramping 38 days so far - for simplicity call it 36, which was a tenth of a year - and I'd seen 8 stones fall. If I was in for a whole year I could expect to see 80 stones fall. One small heap compared to the South Island's endless stones.

The thunder echoed through the headworks of Forest Creek. This was no time to be going into the mountains. I lay there, flossing my teeth. If you collapsed time, I thought, the degradation of the South would sound like this. If you collapsed it sufficiently to make an observable process of the abysmal sliding of slow rock beneath the island, the fearsome jolting of the upraising peaks, the insidious creaking of the ice, the cataclysmic avalanching, and the deep thinking of a billion river-rolled rocks there'd be this continuous thunder. Years would go past as nano seconds, you'd effectively eliminate yourself. You would not be here, watching lightning x-ray your tent. Bigger it - you should not be here. I cursed the locals softly. I give you these thoughts without conclusion. Rain began to snik, then steadily to beat on the thin nylon fabric overhead. I rolled over and went to sleep.

Next day was clear, but fierce gusts staggered me on the slopes as I climbed the old pack trail, hooked up with Neutral Creek, and finally followed one of its tributaries to a tarn at 1,900 metres.



Tussock country wasn't safe for fire, but I was determined to celebrate. I adjusted stepping stones out to a flat dry stone that lay in the tarn, set up the Whisperlite there and brewed a noon-time coffee from tarn water.

This was the highest point on the South Island walk, and I sat there, eating cabin bread and cheese, drinking the coffee, looking back over range after blue range fading into distance, and far below me the glint of the Rangitata. I've come across this land, these rivers. Every step.

The pleasure that gave me was real but elusive. It wasn't challenge so much. Occasionally the views it yielded, like this one, were intense. There was something about the detail of it all too that shone - the first brown serrated beech leaf, the green chunk of serpentine, the red shotgun shell, the bird skull, Upper Wairoa Hut, Blue Lake Hut, Caroline shelter . . . huts by the dozen, and dozens of people from Kevin Wills to Max Crisp. All of it was out there in the folds of the land - out in the blue.

I looked to the clouds. South Island skies often have a cataclysmic feel. South Island cloud is a vast arch, or it is a long smooth wind-stroked boa, or it is a big white lens. Tramping along below it, looking up I'd often thought the South Island skies had three separate weathers. Today too. Ragged bits of nimbus sailed past at eye level. Lenticular clouds pressed onto the alpine summits. Above all of that, the sky was brushed with mare's tail wisps of cirrus.



I went on up the tumbled slope behind the tarn to the standing pillars of rock there, and at 12.45 pm crossed over the 1940 metre pass. It was unnamed on the map, but okay, I'd been tramping 39 days, I'd covered around 711 kilometres which was just over half way so I named the place, Midway Pass.



## #17 The Elusive Pink Hyundai

Miriam was waiting in a pink Hyundai. She hadn't been there for the first part of the walk, still working out notice from the job she'd quit, but she was here now and acting as support. She'd come around to Mesopotamia, and farewelled me at Forest Creek.

I told her then I hoped to break out on Lilybank Road, right on the junction with the Tekapo Skifield Road. We laid out the map and found the place. I figured I might do the tramp in two days, but they'd be full days and I wouldn't be out until late. Wait there until dusk on the second day, I'd suggested. If I hadn't showed by then, she shouldn't worry. It was an unmarked route, I had no clear idea of the terrain, it might take me longer, and if not in two days then I'd be out on the third.

In my own mind though, I was determined to make it through in two days. I came over Midway Pass, pleased with my timing. I'd easily get through the range and down to Tekapo Lake by dusk. I was pleased with myself generally - from here it all sloped downward and Lekis out, I leaped with goatish speed down all the big broken rocks that lay on the far side of the pass. When I got down to smooth rock, to moss and tussock again I was practically skipping.

The valley was bending east. I couldn't believe that it would do that. I spread the map and took out my GPS. I'd come over a ridge where four valleys intersected. Up there the head of one valley was separated from its neighbour by mere metres. I'd dropped into the wrong valley.

I plugged back up, diminished. I stared at the grey scree, and noticed how water runoff had sorted it with as much skill as any human agency into long curving paths of perfectly graded material so that the hill was veined and patterned. Wow, magnificent. Wow, big deal. I summited a second time, I saw a hydro lake to the south, and I dropped down towards it, into the Coal River Valley. I'd lost close to an hour.



The wind began to buffet me in giant gusts that suddenly came, and as suddenly died. The mountains beside me sometimes gave off an almost sub-aural rumble, though whether that was the resonance of some distant jet, or the bass notes from Coal River somehow sorted and amplified by these vast shingle slopes, or maybe just the wind in the crags, I was unsure.

I lost altitude steadily, then came round a bend in the river and a different landscape opened up. High stepped terraces, steep hills milled by the ice to regular gradients, and everything covered by yellow tussock. In the distance, between the hills, was a perfect V of turquoise lakewater. That was my destination and between me and it, the matagouri now compounded, the wind turned to a gale, the sun disappeared into luminous shafts, and then came the rain, sweeping across the valley.



Out by dusk. I cut across tussock towards my linkup with the skifield road. The hillside was exposed and lashed now by something close to sleet. I put on my gloves. I powered through chest high tussock with the Lekis out and working, and dropped into a huge hole. I felt my leg twist under me with a sickening pull of ligaments.

I was up to my neck, but I fought upward and out of the hole without missing a beat, without pausing even to check if the knee was in fact damaged. Without witnesses, still I was embarrassed and instinctively anxious not to linger in comic disarray. Shocked, I brushed at myself and went on but more slowly, no longer trusting the land. The light was beginning to fade but I saw a skifield hut, hiked across to it and turned down the skifield road.



Five kilometres to go.

My leg hurt, and one foot was sore. I took off the right boot. The little toenail was pulled and bleeding. I dressed it with Second Skin, a gelatinous treatment that relieves pressure, and went on, but I'd begun to hobble.

I came out on a high bluff. I could see the lake. I could see a pink car down at the water's edge. The mobile hadn't been a lot of use on the trail so far, and I'd left it behind. A shame that. Miriam had her own mobile, and if I'd thought about it, it was plain that here, across a lake and within sight of Tekapo, there'd be reception.

The light was beginning to fade. How to tell her? I stood on the bluff. I took out my Maglite and waved the light in the direction of the car. Pretty hopeless that, but maybe as it got darker, the light would be more use.

I unscrewed the top of my Maglite so that the bulb was naked, unsurrounded by reflectors or glass. This is a Maglite trick you can use in a hut for 360° light and I figured that, rather than any directional beam as I came on, Miriam was more likely to spot this steadily moving lamp.

The lad with the lamp moved slowly down the hill. Rays of the deepening night began to converge upon his shining bulb. He moved onto the flats, no more than three kilometres from the lake now, and in the darkness beyond the lamp he suddenly saw a woman's form - Miriam waiting at the roadside ahead, silent. She'd walked in to meet him. The mutual excitement of the impending meeting was palpable, yet his woman showed real self-control as he dragged himself toward her. She simply stood silent, waiting. This happened more than once. Again and again she waited at the roadside, and again and again the self control she showed was the utter self control, as it turned out, of a small tree, a standing stone, a fence-post, a stump.

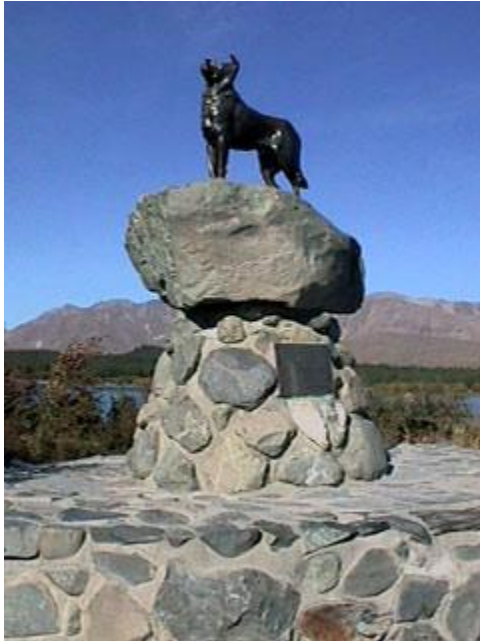
Still, she'd be there. It was 9 pm - way past dusk, but if you looked to the west you could make out the very last streak of twilight. I finally came up to the junction.

She wasn't there! Right. I switched smoothly to martyr mode. I jiggled furiously at the door of a grader that was parked at the road junction. This cabin with the big windows looking out over the lake that would keep you warm and dry and where you could bend yourself around the gear lever to sleep. Locked - of course it was bloody locked. Right. I'd walk to Tekapo, it was only 20 kilometres, I'd be there by 2 am. I'd rap at the cabin door and raise my finger as the door opened, an embodiment of accusation - the sort of thing that comes at you when you've seriously morally erred, from beyond the grave.

And I set off. The night was clear again and pricked by a thousand stars. But then in that darker scribble of mountains at the base of the sky, lightning flickered, and huge fingers of clag came streaming out of the Godley Valley. The first big gusts of a familiar wind hit. Storm coming. It was time, now that I'd cooled down, to camp but for a long minute I could do nothing but hold the tent horizontal and flapping in my hand.

Finally I got the thing up and crawled in. Cold winds battered the tent. The rain again pelted down. I awoke later with a start. A huge voice had just yelled "HUT!" It was code for safety of some sort. "Yes ! Hut!" I yelled in response before waking fully and feeling foolish.

## #18 The MacKenzie Basin



The bronze sheepdog stood against the sky and a busload of Thais crowded around the plinth. A Gaelic inscription praised the dog . . . *Brannachdan air na cu caurach.*

Someone was at my sleeve, a Japanese who pointed and shrugged about the dog.

"A hero," I said, and pumped the muscle on my arm.  
"The dog is a hero. Sheep."

"Yes, yes, yes."

The Thais went, and a group of Malaysians were next to take the stand, arms about slender waists for the group photo. Nearby, a stretch limo pulled up to the Church of the Holy Shepherd, and a Japanese couple got out. The minister met them at the church door. The couple bowed and went in. Two witnesses and a photographer followed. The church door closed and a 'Wedding in Progress' sign stood

propped at the step for the next thirty minutes. Then the bell rang out. The couple emerged and posed for photos.



Back at the motorcamp, I picked up a pamphlet that advertised lectures on stars in southern skies. A Japanese voice answered the phone. There was a lecture, the woman said politely, but it was in Japanese.

Chinese and Malaysians ate lunch in the Chinese restaurant. Japanese ate lunch in the Japanese restaurant. Not to say people of every nation didn't lunch across the cultures in Tekapo at Italian and Mexican restaurants here, and even at Kiwi restaurants. But the Kiwi volunteers from a local beautification group who were offloading soil and flowers from utes into

big planter boxes on the main street seemed, amidst it all, quite as isolated and distinct as any of the other ethnic groups.

I wore a hat and sunblock because this was going to be a big day out and walked right beside it on the metalled service road. I walked the canal.

The sky was hard and blue, the land was flat and endlessly tussocked, and I followed a calm and straight strip of water towards its vanishing point. Here and there along banks angled accurately down into the deep glassiness of the canal, a stone might protrude, and when it did, a small eddy spun away. But call that an aberration. The water was dead flat and moved along

at a steady pace. I threw in a stick and slowly outpaced it, but take nothing from that either - the canal water ran true to its own clear character of minimal disturbance, minimal involvement - no kayak was allowed here because those ripples would erode the banks, and even the natural streams that bubbled toward the canal down the hill were piped sternly away beneath it, to drain into the Tekapo River and - was it boring?

Not a bit. On the far side of the canal and exactly parallel to my service road was a tarmac road signposted - misleadingly I thought since the canal was built in the 1960s - The Bullock Track. And there, once an hour, sometimes twice, a Lycra-clad, iridescent-helmeted, panniered cyclist might pedal past, and wave. Too, there came a line of ducks with steady wingbeat that saw me, and turned with precision to fly directly overhead. Not boring, no, but I understood the duck's need to generate excitement on this plain. Eight kilometres in, the canal did a near right-angle turn, and at the time I took the turn, I thought it likely to be the highlight of my walking day.

Beyond the turn lay yet another vanishing point, but I'd emerged now from behind the uniformly sloped embankment that had previously blocked the view west, and the Mackenzie Basin opened right up.

The space, the light, the landscape!

I felt I could write a poem. The hump of Mt John now rose out of the plain - a forehead shape - and certain things seemed to cohere. The electricity implicit in the hydro canal and the thin steelwork of the pylons. The sun, the heat, the glinting finish of the alps, the flash of colour from the highway, the silence. And Mt John was a thinker - a buried saint. I named the poem - Tekapo Hydro Canal. I got off the first line - The Forecourt of Heaven might be like this - And then I forgot the poem and began instead to gabble.

Mobile phone reception was perfect in the Mackenzie basin. I rang two mates and talked. I rang my sister who wasn't home. I rang my daughter and talked some more. I rang Miriam. The pink Hyundai was waiting up ahead where the highway crossed the canal - I walked towards it and kept talking, and then I could see it.

"I see you! I see you!"

Talking all the way in. She'd prepared a noon picnic complete with tablecloth spread out on the tussock. The wonderful bird.



I went on down the embankment. I passed above the farm where Charles Hamilton had worked on his pioneering jetboat. I'd begun to edge up on big mountains. Mount Cook was now just 10 kilometres off and I looked for the summit, but it was clouded in. The wind got up, and I shut down into the slog of it, the beat of my boots on it, the whole self-absorbed long-distance rhythm of it when the cellphone beeped.

A text message. I popped it onscreen.

*I love u*

O Forecourt of Heaven! I inflated with a whoomph - side to side of the Mackenzie Basin. The suddenness of it almost hurt. The impact of a message like that in a place like this was almost cruel.

But hang on - who loved me?

I rang my wife.

"You text messaged me just now."

"No, why?"

"Someone did. So okay, it wasn't you then."

"What was the message?"

"Just someone wishing me well I guess."

I hunkered over the mobile. I tapped out a message of my own.

*Who are u ?*

I pulled up the reply function - sent the message. The answer came back in a trice -

*Unsuccessful. Try again later.*

I followed the canal past a trout farm. Anglers cast their lines just beyond it, and then the canal ended at a screened intake and the clear tonnages I'd followed all day sloped away down massive penstock pipes to a hydro station. I went on down the hill, found an informal camp ground beside Lake Pukaki, and put up the tent.



## #20 Lake Ohau - Omarama

"And what would you folks like?"

"I'll have a Speights."

"A Brandy and dry please."

"And where are you two from?"

"Auckland."

"Auckland! We don't serve Aucklanders."

"What! "

"Well, why should we be paying for your roads?"

"You're not paying for our roads."

"Geoff doesn't know about that," said Miriam to the barman. "He's out of touch. He doesn't watch TV."

"What's going on?"

"There's a new tax," said Miriam quietly "4.5c a litre on petrol sales is going to Auckland roads."

"Right. Doesn't matter. Look mate. We're paying for your roads. I've been walking up and down and around this country, and guess what? There are roads out to the South Island sheep stations to a single station sometimes that are . . . that are - "

"Very very long," said Miriam.

"Public roads! We pay for those, and anyway - is this New Zealand or the bloody Balkans ? "

"Okay," said the barman, unfazed. "The road between Queenstown and Christchurch has a one way bridge stuck right in the middle of it. All our operators pay tax, and we've still got a one-way bridge on the main tourist road !"

Ohau Lodge's Danny Kortwright was the stroppiest barman I'd ever struck, but he relented finally, served the drinks and we talked on. His father had been a head shepherd and Danny had moved around some of the South Island's biggest stations. Even as a kid he'd done tough jobs - sheep raking where the chopper drops you in snow up to your armpits, and you tramp a rescue path for trapped sheep. He'd seen hard things - sheep dead of starvation in snow caves, sheep that had eaten the wool off each others backs. He'd come through testing situations - taking the top beat on a mustering sweep along a big hill. Getting to the ridge only to see dense fog rolling upwards from the far side. Shouting a warning to the median and low shepherds, but caught himself as fog poured over the ridge and down. Sitting it out beneath a rock overhang with his dogs. All day, and all through the night.

That night the wind pelted the lodge with stones, and in the morning Lodge owner Mike Neilson ordered up a Metfax Printout of the Mt Cook Alpine Forecast. We both pored over that. It reported

jauntily that during the day winds at 3,000 metres would reach 90 kph. But even at the sort of level I was planning to do that day - an unmarked route over the Ohau Range - I was going to be up around 1400 metres and winds there would rise to a predicted 60 kph. The forecast also predicted snow on the saddles and a snow line descending to 1600 metres.

Mike Neilson traced with his finger wind direction across the alps.

"These winds will break up. The mountains slice them down the middle. If it comes from a southerly quarter rather than a westerly quarter that's different, but I think you're fine to go."

A group from Hiking New Zealand, a company that does guided walks for international and New Zealand hikers, was coming down the DoC Freehold Creek walkway Freehold Creek as I came up.



Ben Ohau's 1500 metre bulk loomed behind us, and you could see the waves of Lake Ohau breaking even from this height. The weather was cutting up, and it'd begun to hail in the tops, the guide told me. The group wasn't staying out as planned.

Then I left the Freehold Creek track and improvised a route across tussock and Spaniard at the base of blunt rocky peaks. Below me the saddle was a maze of cushiony plants and shining water, a beautiful bog, but I'd been told to keep away from it.



Hail bounced off my hood, and it got cold. I crouched in the lee of a big rock to eat a lunch of salmon and crackers, and when I was ready to go again, pulled on a pair of gloves. New gloves. I felt good about that. 80 million possums, said the label on this new product, eat 20,000 tonnes of bush every night. I had my Possumdown gloves. I was doing my bit.

I came rockhopping fast down steep tussocky slopes. Occasional outriders lashed me then disappeared, but the body of the hail-storm stayed just behind me, rolling along as a big whitish blur. I kept looking over my shoulder - still there. The moon does that when you're a kid, follows along, but the moon doesn't grow in height so as to block out the sun.



Hurry. Watch your ankles. At Ohau email news came in that our trust secretary, Alison Henry, had broken an ankle out on a track. Jumping one to another down 1,000 rocks you sometimes fall. The later in the day you jump the more likely you are to fall. I fell - once, twice. It's a warning that you're getting tired, and I adopted the kind of mantra that sometimes overtakes you when the tramping - Concentrate Geoffrey - I reached the river, had sometimes to crawl across steeply sloping river banks of tight-packed and dusty soil half loess, half shingle, slippery, easy to slide upon. into the dropoff into the river. Ankle-breaking leg-breaking, potential. Concentrate Geoffrey. Over and over. Then the tramp got easier, and flatter and soon there was nothing to worry about but matagouri thickets, but the mantra, once begun, segued effortlessly into something more profound - One two three FOUR five One two three FOUR five. It was true. Often at the end of a long day, I found simple comfort in simply counting in odd numbers, so the emphasis fell first on the right foot, then on the left foot.

Where was the hut?

I'd seen it on the maps, and put it into the trail plan. At Doc HQ in Twizel, I'd sat down with Mac McNamara and Ian Guthrie - the land had been retired to DoC and they'd inherited an 1880s musterers hut there. It was in original condition.

"It's dilapidated," said Mac

"Right," I said "But I'll be able to sleep there."

"If you don't mind company," said Ian Guthrie grinning. "Might be better to sleep in your tent."

Cold white weather rolled down the valley and the hurrying tramper was a speck in front of it, and at every bend of the river he searched for the hut. Hut! Okay, so there'd be rats. But you hang your pack from a hook, and rats don't worry you too much.

The hut wasn't there, and suddenly it was - concealed against the bank of a long river terrace until I practically stumbled over its roof.

Overgrown old brown beer bottles scattered about. I unhooked the door, it was jammed, and I put my shoulder down and piled in. One small louvre admitted a shaft of pale light. The hut framework and rafters were unmilled beech - thin



trunks or branches, bark still intact, trimmed and whittled to fit. A rat skeleton was embedded in the dirt floor. Rum bottles lay all around, their labels foxed and lacy with acidic decay. Summer heat had softened a candle that had flopped away from its base holder like toothpaste out of a tube, and hardened there. The bunk bases were large gauge chicken wire, with sacking mattresses, the kapok exploded out of them. The fireplace was just a mound of solid sloping ash held in place by sagging corrugated iron sheets with a broom propped there made of sticks. But there was a table too, with a skillet and above it the only sign of order - three billies hung on nails on the wall, a big one, a medium one and a small one.

It wasn't the Hilton, but I was very pleased I'd made it in. I broke out the stove and fired it up, put on the pot. I'd make myself a coffee. Shake up the milk. Break out the biscuits. Then put on the evening meal. A slow but steady pampering would take place.

The biggest billy, hanging on the wall suddenly boiled over. A thick grey fluid poured out, flowed upwards onto a rafter, then sped along the central beam

Maybe the cramped confines of the hut magnified it all but the hairs stood up on the back of my neck. The billy was only about a metre from my nose, I leaped back, and the animal had made it up into the rafters before I'd comprehended that it was a possum.

It hung there, its face turned away. The theory seemed to be - if it couldn't see me, I couldn't see it. The water began to boil and I poured it over the coffee bag. One of the great pleasures of the tramp is exactly this. A hard day behind you, dirty weather outside, and cupped in your hands a hot drink. The hump of fur hanging over my head spoiled the magic. I took out a Leki, gave him a prod and a suggestion -

"Look mate - why don't you shoot through?"

The possum decided he was in a bad place. He climbed down from the rafter and holed up in the far corner of the top bunk. Fine - that was a good compromise - at least he wasn't going to drop on me.

I began to drink my coffee.

HA-Ah-Ah-Ah-ah-ah-ah-ahahahahahah TAT--tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tatatatatat.

The possum hissed and spat. I whirled on him. I stood up and pointed right at him.

"Look mate - don't push it."

HA-Ah-Ah-Ah-ah-ah-ah-ahahahahahah TAT--tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tatatatatat.

"I'm bigger than you. I'm stronger than you."

HA-Ah-Ah-Ah-ah-ah-ah-ahahahahahah TAT--tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tatatatatat.

"I'm more intelligent than you are, and in short I wouldn't do the big challenge if I were you."

The possum began to walk across the chicken wire towards me. Bad move. His paws slipped through the gaps and he was suddenly cast with all four legs sticking straight down. He looking up at me - a bit like a man suddenly clapped into the stocks at the mercy of the leering crowd. Right in front of his snout, were the possum gloves. I hoped he'd got the point, and I left him to his own devices.

I drank my coffee, and tried to re-enter the usual sequence - drinking, eating, sleeping.

It was coming on dark by now. I cooked up some pasta and tuna and ate. Now to sleep. The possum and I were not going to sleep in the same room. Either he went, or I did. He'd extracted himself out of the chicken wire, and climbed to the rafters again. I'd prodded him a few times, but he was unresponsive, and to be honest, I felt like a bully. He wasn't going to be shifted. and his claws were so deep into the beechwood you could hardly prize the beast loose without wounding him

Besides, I'd grown just a little affectionate towards him. A couple of things had happened. When he was baled in the corner, up on his hind legs and facing out he didn't look that different from the teddy bear that sat looking at your childhood bed.

And I suspected he was very old. One eye was milky. He was half blind, and - since he hadn't heard me come into the hut and crash the pots - deaf as well.

Out of respect for the aged, and for my own comfort, I went outside and put up the tent. I bedded down there, and a couple of times during the night I was awoken.

Haaaah Ah Ah Ah Ha -TA-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-

I could hear them moving about. More than one. I imagined a ring of them around the tent, paws linked, doing a triumphant kapa haka.

I expected the hut to be empty by morning, and it was. I peered into the various corners of it - no possum - and I got on with preparing a muesli breakfast and shaking up the milk.

Huh ! Right then I saw two ears sticking out of the big billy. Two pink ears, and I felt a surge almost of affection. This was his turangawaewae, the place where he stood. He was too old. Too set in his ways. He would give it up for nobody, would not be moved even by the threat of death. Well, good on him.



I felt a bond, and gave the bottom of the billy a few playful taps -

Haaaah Ah Ah Ah Ha -TA-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-

It rose up in immediate tooth and claw defence. This time he wasn't moving. He chose to defend himself from inside his tin castle, and right through breakfast the pink nose and the milky eye and the nasty teeth hissed and rattled and waved its claws. I packed up straight after. I closed the door behind me noting the loose bit of corrugated iron beside the door that served as a possum flap. And then I left and was glad to be gone.



On down the Ahuriri River. I'd crossed a provincial boundary somewhere around here and Otago's signature was immediate - the flat iron fenceposts common to the treeless tussocky downs. And, since there was no place to nail the end of a coil of wire, a fencer's knot to tie the end of one roll of no 8 wire to the next.

I went on down to the junction of the Ahuriri River then round to a river bridge on Birchwood Road. The pink Hyundai waited there. I made a mark at the bridge, and we drove 20 kilometres, following the Ahuriri River to Omarama.



## #21 Omarama

### *People in the place of light*

Omarama was a crossroads town. It had a motorcamp, a service station, two hotels, a cafe, a merino sculpture and a leaping trout. It didn't need a sculpture of the gliders - they just hung there in the sky anyway, silently turning. It was, said the sign outside of town, a Place of Light, and it was the place where Ross Kelman ran the Omarama Hotel.

Ross Kelman found me a cheap cabin at the back of the hotel, and Miriam went off to trace her mother's history at Waimate. I wanted to write. I wanted to be alone. A quick feed and then back to it. I'd done a story for the Sunday Star Times and my internet readership on the south walk had suddenly soared to 11,000. Ross brought his plate of bacon and eggs over to my table -

Aside from the sound of bacon and egg demolition, silence. Ross didn't so much eat his breakfast, as smash it with his mouth. He ate like a shearer. He was a shearer, a blade shearer. And a ex-slaughterman. He was whiplash thin. Everything he did was fast, and quick, and it was always one thing after another. Ross finished his breakfast and wiped his mouth with a napkin

"So you're into walking eh? A couple of us - "

"Hey that team's got more horses than the Budweiser Hitch," said an America sitting at the table alongside pointing to one of the historic photos that lined the wall in this beautiful old pub. Ross whipped around.

"Twenty of 'em. They're hauling fencing steel over the pass."

He whipped back.

"A couple of us are clearing out a walk up in the hills on Quailburn. You're the expert on walks, and I'd really like you to see it. Take an hour no more. Up there and back. Give us your opinion - would the tourists like it? What do you say? Take the dogs, give 'em a run."

"Around here was the last area developed for farming and it'll be the last area developed for tourism. I'm not talking a rope from a bridge," said Murray Waters as Ross threw six cans of Speights through the side window and piled the dogs in. "Nor the Asian market - you let them see a rabbit in a field and they're happy. I'm talking quality. I'm talking history." In the time it took to tell we'd sped out of the hotel yard and onto the highway. Murray gestured out the window towards Mt Benmore. "Up near the top of that hill there's a spring where I keep a bottle of whisky hidden. That's what the old Scottish shepherds did, and when I take my clients up in the 4WD, we stop for a nip."

Murray Waters was an ex-real estate man out of Christchurch and he had a small tourist business in Omarama. He did 4WD and bike tours in the surrounding ranges, but he was planning to expand the choices. He and Ross had explored the top of the Ahuriri River by kayak. They'd also looked at the Quailburn walk.

"Of course Ross won't be doing the driving," said Murray with one hand on his hat as the big Commodore sailed over small hills and swept along metal roads at the edge of a slide - "I will."

I guessed Ross' driving was a local feature. Nigel and Terry Cooke of the Quailburn Station were doing a stock count as we came past. We stopped briefly and Nigel warned Ross as we pulled out -

"Stock'll be on the road when you're coming back."

"You can afford to lose a few," said Ross.

We pulled up alongside Quailburn Station's old wool shed and went in.



"She's a classic," said Ross. "Not one straight line in the sucker. Everything's been reused for this that and the next thing. But the whole thing is as solid as a rock. The floor - she's up - she's down - up, down, up, down. And over here, look. One of the few sheds still using the old hand press."

We walked through meadow to an abandoned house.

"Be 60 or 70 years old at least," said Ross, slapping the walls. "Still nice and dry. This was the second cottage built on Quailburn, and here - " he gestured at a couple of fluffy fledgelings lying feet up and very

dead on straw inside one of the rooms " - is the extinct Quailburn duck."

Ross hald sprinted up the hill and waited for us to catch up. The springs and seats of an old dray were sinking into the earth.

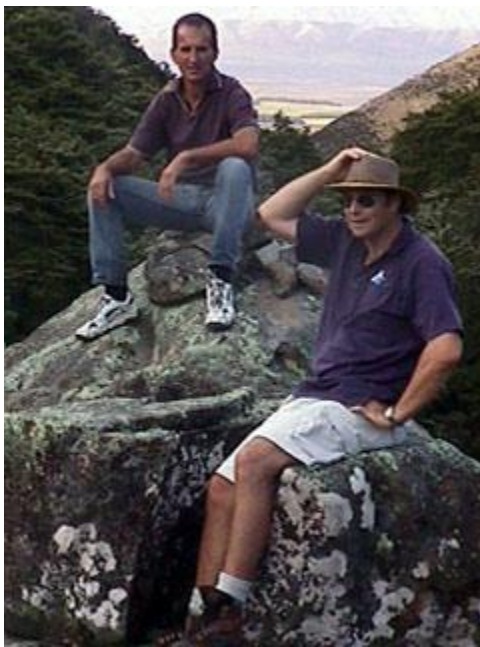
"Pretty good eh? said Ross, as he spun around and kicked at a nearby pile that didn't quite match the image.

"Car tires don't fit though - Murray'll get rid of those."

A pair of fencing pliers were stuck into a fencepost alongside and Ross smoothly adapted them into his historic walk -

"Antique fencing pliers - once Murray takes the plastic off."

We followed a stream up. Ross was waiting up ahead by trees fallen across the track.



"Shift this one. That one. Murray will bring the chainsaw up and sort this out. We do this one without Resource Consent. And round about here, Murray can plant the old bottles for the tourists to find"

"Tourists are smart," said Murray. "I don't ever try to pull one. They'll pick it. You need to know your history. But if I don't know I don't try to pretend I'm an expert."

"What's an expert but a drip under pressure," said Ross.

"This station was named for the quail they used to find here," said Murray "It was subdivided off from Benmore in 1916. I think the trees here are old. A lot of the country around here

was set fire to by the Maori. Then the settlers did the same thing. But gullies like this were left unburned."

I listened. The trail had been well-used once, with concrete fill between some of the rocks. A farm trail, and if so, one destination was certainly the musterer's hut where I'd met the possum. That lay just two kilometres away over the hill, and had once been part of Quailburn. Twizel DoC planned to preserve that hut as a reminder of the old musterers' life and a link from the hut to this beautifully wooded gully and down to the old woolshed seemed a natural progression. It'd need permission from Quailburn, but it was a thought, and it occurred to me it would make an interesting leg for Te Araroa.

## #22 To Lake Hawea

### *Tramping problems on the pastoral leases*

The pastoral leaseholds I'd come up to so far mostly had legal access running through on roads, or riverbeds, or fishing access corridors. Where I'd crossed actual leasehold land, the passage had usually been brief.

But the 65 kilometres of high country ahead crossed through three pastoral leaseholdings in a row. I phoned the farmers and got the okay from all three, but on a one-off basis - no permissions for any national trail.



I wasn't too worried about that. Te Araroa Trust had an agreement with the Department of Conservation that brought us into the Crown Tenure review process. Under CTR the South Island's pastoral leases were being divided into land suitable for farming, which could then be freeholded, and into land that would be managed by DoC as recreation or scientific reserve.

In Twizel, DoC people had discussed with me the trail route through to Hawea they'd be most likely to favour. It used mainly DoC estate and needed to traverse only one brief strip of pastoral lease. That strip could possibly be gained under the CTR process, though not for a few years yet.

After that talk, I knew Te Araroa's route to Hawea would be different from the one immediately in front, but I wanted to test my navigation on the big rolling hills and high ridges of Otago high country, and I decided to take advantage of the permissions I had, and go anyway.

It was also a chance to get a farmer's perspective on the general problems of trampers on pastoral land, and before I left I went in to talk to Russell Emmerson. By reputation his Forest Range station ran one of the best merino flocks in Otago, and I sat down to listen.

The South Island summer, suggested Russell, was the time most trampers would choose to walk any trail. But summer was exactly the season where sheep grazed the same high ground a trail would favour and the mobs would be frequently disturbed.

OSH regulations also worried high country farmers, he said. Did the farmers have to individually warn every trumper of anticipated hazards, as OSH seemed to suggest?

And fire - who'd look after landowner compensation if any trampers' careless match destroyed grazing? Search and rescue also - who'd be responsible for signing trampers in and out of country that could quickly turn hazardous? And disease - foot rot and other animal infections might spread on trampers' boots from one farm to another.

Rubbish and the failure of trampers to bury their waste was another problem, and all of the uncertainties and potential disturbances together might be seen to transgress the clause in the pastoral lease contract that guaranteed leaseholders "quiet enjoyment" as a fundamental right.

But as to my one-off tramp, that was okay. Russell took my map, checked my route, offered me the station's hunting lodge as an overnight stop, and asked me to wipe my boots before crossing his boundary.

Back to my mark on the Ahuriri River Bridge then off at a fast clip, Leki working, lucky hanky jerking. Along Avon Burn, past the sheep yards - it was good to be back. Sunshine, fresh air, an open road so to speak. I had 65 kilometres of hill country in front, and I planned to walk it fast. It was criss-crossed by trails but I'd lodged waypoints in the GPS. There'd be no confusion.

I sweated in the valley for hours. Before starting I'd swapped my usual polyprop for a linen shirt, and that was a mistake for it just got wringing wet, and whenever I stopped on a climb, the sweat went dead cold. That was hardly important though. I was climbing fast, reached a major 1,200 metre pass in good time and stopped for a drink.



Luck. There right before me on the ground was a fencer's knot. Unattached to a fence, a nice patina of rust, the distinctive No. 8 wire granny knot. It was a little Otago icon, a good find, and I put it in my pocket. I swung the pack on again, then had a thought. I'd put this pass in the GPS as the first major waypoint - I was confident about it, but I may as well check. I fired up the GPS, and my eyebrows shot up. Wrong pass. The way the GPS read, I should be over on the next hill.

Well whatever. I pulled out the compass. I was headed the right way at least, and the Lindis River would be hard to miss. I went on down a steep track to the valley below.

Time passed. I came to the river and followed it down. The sun began to sink and the big soft shoulders of the Otago hills held the shadows and glowed. A daylight moon hung above it all in a clear sky. Sheep trotted away in front. This was the life, a New Zealander in New Zealand all day long.



I came up towards the big rocky cleft of the Lindis River Gorge, and there standing high above it was Little Breast Hill. On the flank of the hill I saw the gleam of a hut. I calculated 6 kilometres to go.

I forded the Lindis back and forth in the gorge, then a 4WD track led away and I followed it up to a high terrace. By now I'd done 30 kilometres and was walking by moonlight. The track diverged somewhere up ahead one trail going on along this high terrace, and one winding up to the summit of Little Breast Hill. I came to a junction.

This was my second major waypoint and I checked the GPS. Okay - wrong junction. The GPS readout put the position of the right junction somewhere back to the north-west, 800 metres away, back in the dark hills. I found that hard to believe, and looked around, trying to get my bearings by sight. Little Breast Hill - where the hell was it? In the black range beside me I could see three or four silhouette summits that might qualify as Little Breast Hill.

The GPS had been very accurate all the way down the South Island - could I trust it now? I studied the map by torchlight. I found the terrace I'd climbed, the ford I'd crossed, the sharp bend in the track I'd just wound up. Everything seemed to confirm that this junction was the right one and I should now take the uphill track. The GPS must be in error. An enormous error like that was unheard of though - must be that I'd be caught by the war in Afghanistan. The Americans controlled the system, and must be mucking with it to put the Taleban gunners off their game. That was the only explanation I could think of.

I zigzagged up to 1000 metres and by 9 pm found the Little Breast Hill hunting hut. Unpainted corrugated iron walls gleamed in the moonlight, and a spring pumped away beside it. I opened the door onto a nicely ordered paradise. Cooking gas, magazines, maps on the wall, bunks with blankets and pillows, cupboards stocked with tea bags, jams, pots and pans. I made dinner and sat looking out the big windows at the moon and the Otago hills.

Next day I set off early up Little Breast Hill. It was a classic Otago day - a blue sky, silence, and black rock outcrops standing up from the tussock as thresholds to emptiness. I climbed to 1600 metres, saw the 3,000-metre summit of Mt Aspiring standing to the west, and the 4WD track I needed to follow running away across fairly





benign hills until it dwindled to a thread in the distance.

By the close of day I stood on to a high viewpoint above Lake Hawea gazing at the vast and misted valley below where four distant specks - I guessed at Harvards - looped and rolled. The mobile worked here, and I rang Russell Emmerson and Peter Patterson, who'd asked me to call and sign off.

"A great walk Russell, and no incidents except my GPS is worthless. All the readings were wrong, and I'm guessing the Americans put an error in the system."

"Yeah?" said Russell. "I flew to Christchurch yesterday and we hit the waypoints all the way through."

I came steeply down beside Johns Creek, out past the firewood stacks of Lake Hawea Station, and into town. Night fell as I trudged an interminable lakefront strip finally to the Lake Hawea Motor Inn. The kitchen was closed but the staff hustled me some battered fish, and I went up to the bar to order a beer.



"Where you from?"

"I'm from Auckland."

"Auckland!"

There was the usual long pause, a slight inclination of the barman's head to the picture windows, to the perfection of a full moon now risen and the silhouette of cabbage trees against a glimmering lake.

"Auckland eh?"

"Yep."

"Be raining in Auckland. Or muggy or windy or something up there wouldn't it?"



## #23 Lake Hawea - Wanaka

### *The Otago Lifestyle*

An irrigation canal took me most of the way to Albert Town where a new mall was just built, and dust from mounds of unlandscaped earth blew into a newly-opened bar. A nicely lettered sign hung there - IITYWYBMAD.

“What does that mean?”

“If I tell you, will you buy me a drink?” said a woman on a barstool, droll, dangling one shoe off her toe.

“Okay,” I said.

If I tell you will you buy me a drink,” she said.

“Yes,” I said, “I will.”

Yellow leaves slanted down to the river and were borne away. The trail between Albert Town and Wanaka was lined with poplars and overlooked the Clutha - not the longest, but in water volume the biggest New Zealand river. Even here, no more than a kilometre from its Lake Wanaka source it was a powerful river. I walked through the yellow drifts of early Autumn alongside the broad flat expanse of the river, the swirl and tumble of it whenever the channel narrowed.



I came in to Wanaka through Penrith Park in the afternoon. On these outskirts Aspiring Real Estate and other agencies had staked out the subdivisions. Further in a Jet Ranger helicopter sat on a lawn, and the house behind was long, low and heavy in the Frank Lloyd Wright style with wide expanses of glass and square chimneys.

Wealth had settled in here with houses of Otago schist, slate rooves, Cinderella gates and sweeping driveways. Or the dwellings were upright and clean-planned post-modern with cacti and yew trees, and names like Camelot. People were building their dreams here. It was architectural, it was arriviste. It reminded me of something - the blue sky, the rocky hills, the well watered lawns, the tinted glass - it was California beside a lake. The sunset came on. Red light painted the glass, the mountaintops and the huge smooth flanks of lenticular clouds. It was classic. It was picture window material. You could see the attraction of what the real estate signs called the Otago lifestyle.



The pink Hyundai circled in Wanaka's main street, I touched a pole, and we went up to stay with local vet and photographer Gilbert van Reenen. He and his wife Robyn were putting us up in a town that was very short of beds. The three-day airshow Warbirds over Wanaka began the next day and the Catalina, the P38s, the DC3 were already droning in the sky. At the airport nearby they tested the PA with Vera Lynn songs.

Gilbert and I sat down that night to study the proposed Te Araroa trail around the Wanaka Lake Shore to Glendhu Bay. Ralph Warburton had pioneered the trail that began just out of town and headed for the bay. The Otago Regional Council had lately taken over, improved, and named the Warburton Walk. But it wasn't complete. The key was access across the station that began where the walk ended - Alphaburn. I took notes. The station was in the Crown Tenure Review process. In negotiation with the Commissioner of Crown lands, the sheep farmers on the big pastoral leasehold properties were freeholding some of their land, but by tradeoff giving up those parts with natural or recreational values. Te Araroa Trust would seek, along with other groups, walking and cycling access round the lakefront to complete the walk.

I talked to Ralph Warburton by phone. He was an ex-Franz Joseph Glacier guide, a cross country skier now aged 83, and I tried to discern what drives a man to make a walk -

“I’m a nature lover,” Ralph said. “There’s no other way I know where you get closer to reality. Mooching along these trails you really have the time to absorb what’s around you and to let it seep into you. I’ve always felt that way.”

I walked his walk at evening looking back on the lights of Wanaka from the bluffs. I met a Swedish cyclist coming back the other way, and asked him where the track ended, and how best I might go on from there to Glendhu Bay. He didn’t hesitate. He’d been raised in the European tradition of freedom to roam.



“The track ends in forest. Its steep. It would be tricky. You’ll need to go over the fence a kilometre or so before the track ends and across the farms.”

I climbed the fence. I expected farmland and was surprised by a sudden vision of a tall house whose whole frontage was a glass atrium. Sited by itself on a bluff, faced out toward Mt Aspiring and far from the road, privacy was not an issue. Momentarily I felt like a spy, didn’t like the feeling and beheld it only for a moment, remembered only its cleanliness, its fixing of lights and polish and crystalline things before I ducked away behind a hill, climbed carefully over electric fences and passed a pleasure boat parked in a hollow. I made my way down to the highway and out to the campground at Glendhu Bay.



## #24 Wanaka - Arrowtown

### *Coagulated rain in the Motatapu Valley*

My *Te Araroa - South Island Trail* report had named the Motatapu Valley as the best Te Araroa route from Wanaka to Queenstown. It was scenic, it was safe, and as a connector between the South Island's two most popular adventure towns it would get high use.

Old maps showed a walking route through the valley, but that was then. Motatapu station owner Don Mackay had closed it down ten years ago.

When compiling the trail report, I'd gone to see the Mackays. Don explained his position. He was a sheep and beef farmer. That was his skill, his occupation and tramping, biking, any kind of tourism was not. In the past, trampers had left his gates open, had left litter and human waste. For such reasons, he'd closed the access.

But the whole family talked through the walkway proposal that night and we agreed that the route through his station could be put in the trail report, tentatively. Options could involve outright purchase - "If the nation says it wants it," Don Mackay said, "We'll move over." Alternatively if trampers paid a fee, the route might also be opened. The fee should be for huts, but someone other than Mackays would have to fund the huts, and maintain them.

Now, as I came away from Wanaka on my South Island walk, Don had agreed to let me test the route. That permission rapidly encompassed three others who jumped at the rare chance to go through the valley - Miriam, and two friends of Gilbert van Reenen, Max Wenden and Lisa Holliday. I walked up to the farmhouse, the others joined me there and we talked again with Don, his wife Sally, son Hamish and daughter in law Anna. Don offered use of one of the farm huts en route, and I thanked him and said again what I'd said at the last meeting - that if Te Araroa did come this way finally, we'd fund our own huts with some payment going back to the farmer. Don said again what he'd said last time - that hiking or any sort of tourism was not his thing, and he deferred to Hamish and Anna, who'd lately begun to take guided 4WD tours through the valley. I turned to Hamish -

"I'll make you an offer within a year."

"I'll be looking over his shoulder when you do," said Don.

"I'll be looking over Don's shoulder," said Sally.

In the long light of morning, one group of six rams bunched in a tawny field, their



faces turned toward us and the high country hills sloping away behind to snow-capped mountains. It was the quintessential South Island scene.

“Look at that!” Max stopped. He took off his pack, dug out his camera, got the shot.

Welcome back to the South Island Max. If for six months you’d seen hills that were just pure white. If there’d been no animals, not even a bird, and no long slant of morning light, just the sun doing a strange wobble in the sky all day, then what else could you do than stop dead for the rams in this classic South Island setting. The two we walked with, Max and Lisa, were straight off the ice, he a pilot with Adventure Network International, she a field guide at Scott Base.



The day was fine and blue, and we walked as couples. For each couple it was the first walk together in a long time, and we left each other more or less alone.

The hut was 20 kilometres up the valley, and to get to it we’d be climbing just 300 metres. It was pleasurable long distance walking. Mountain ramparts stood off either side, but the hills of the Motatapu Valley floor were smoothly rounded, undulating, and the trail drooped away in front invitingly.

We did slow pleasurable things. Lisa was English-born, and at her suggestion we ate elevenses. We gathered mushrooms. Max spotted them first. And then everyone did. We followed the river up. We had one moment of route choice. Should we cross the river here ? We opened the map and studied it awhile. I was aware that one of Antarctica’s best navigators stood at my shoulder. In the days before GPS, and in a place where every direction was north, he’d navigated in a small aircraft upon a blank white ground using only a sun compass. The riverbank decision, I noticed, he left entirely to me. Left bank, right bank - it could be that riverbank decisions in an entirely one directional valley might not have registered as a navigation problem for Max.



The river valley turned sharply east, and a New Zealand falcon stood on the side of a hill, a bottle amid tussock as we came up, a rare and formidable predator that achieves 200 kph in a dive. The bottle sprouted wings, flew off and as we looked to the sky, big clouds were moving in.

Back in Wanaka before we left Gilbert van Reenen had checked the weather with a mate further south and predicted a cold southerly change. "There's coagulated rain on Stewart Island - and that's unusual."

And now the weather came rapidly up from the south. Grey clouds and advancing squalls erased the horizon and softened every valley and ridge around us. Little white balls began to bounce amongst the tussock at our feet.

"This must be what Gilbert meant," said Miriam, "by coagulated rain."

We stopped and put on our parkas. Then the atmosphere seemed to pause. I said to Miriam -

"It's got warm!"

And then it began to snow.

Snow. We turned our faces up to it delighted. I went to walk on, but someone pulled at my sleeve. I turned and her eyes were dancing -

"You know - I'm chuffed to be here with you in the first snow. I know that sounds silly and stupid, but I am."

I stared into the shadows of the hood. We'd been together a long time and we both had memories. We'd once taken a bus around the South Island, exploring it together for seven months, and in a valley called Paradise at the top of Lake Wakatipu I'd been woken by the sudden quiet, had awoken her, and gone out into a magic night. The first snowfall of that trip, and the first snowfall of this one. It was quiet again now. Two hoods came together in the valley.

A helicopter thudded low up the valley, flying the line where the big hill shoulders vanished into cloud. We came up to a gate. Both Don Mackay and a DoC hunter we'd met en route mentioned it. Once you got to the gate with 'Boundary' painted on it, they'd said, the hut was just upriver from there. This one had no paintwork on it though - wrong one. Yes it did, said someone, and sure enough if you stared long enough the letters took shape, old ghost letters that only someone who'd been around since before everything faded would ever readily identify as the word

Boundary.

And sure enough, we rounded a river terrace and a hut stood there in the falling snow. This was the hut at the back of Don and Sally Mackay's station, but used now too by Hamish and Anna for the 4WD trips. It was beautifully stacked with firewood and a can of beer stood on the table.

Max broke out a big Whisperlite that howled in the confines of the hut. I fired up my own Whisperlite, but the flame hardly hissed - there was a problem with pressure.

"It'll be the jet," said Max, "have you got a pricker?"

"No."

"Or maybe the pump."

A couple of Antarctic experts suddenly descended on my Whisperlite. Max whipped out the pump mechanism while the stove was still going. The stove runs on white spirits - highly volatile - it was the sort of action you'd only do if you knew your stove intimately. Max held up the offending pump in the dim light of the hut, and spread the leather.

"A tiny bit of butter on that will make it work better," said Lisa.

"Make sure you get a pricker," said Max.

We made soup. We brewed coffee. The wood stack in the alcove suggested a fire. No, said the girls, conscious that we were guests of the Mackays and that every bit of wood here had been brought in by 4WD. Yes, said the boys, believing that the Mackays in this situation would understand that a fire in a hut snowed in and miles from anywhere was nothing more



nor less than a back country right. We made the fire, but used only three chunks of wood. Smoke billowed into the hut. The boys went outside and studied the chimney. It had a pan on top. Max climbed the hut, took the pan, which was keeled and held steady by a rock on a wire, and moved it off the chimney top.

Max was a practical man, the kind of guy people talked about more than he talked about himself. Gilbert van Reenen told me Max had flown the Drake Passage in a Cessna 185, the fuel tank enlarged by plumbing in an extra barrel of gas strapped into the back of the plane, and just the way he said it conjured visions of a lot of desolate space and a very small aircraft. That was in 1987, bringing the Cessna to Antarctica. The aircraft later became known, for its orange paint job, and for popping up anywhere on the plateau, as the Polar Pumpkin. And it was Lisa who told me that to get from place to place on the polar plateau Max would fly the fuel barrels from his Patriot Hills Base to a forward depot, build that depot sufficiently to make the next hop, then fly more barrels forward to the next fuel cache, leapfrogging from base to desolate base into the interior. And that in the katabatic winds of Patriot Hills, Max's plane sometimes flew by itself, lifted clear of the snow with only the tethers holding it down.

I stayed outside and stared at snow that was slowly blanketing the hills all around. I looked up and pure white flakes fell straight out of a dirty sky. Lisa was at the hut door -

"Enjoying the snow?" I asked.

"It's pretty, it's unexpected and special. And a bit of a busman's holiday."



And back in the hut she said -

"Strange. You spend so much time and money to make your own house a lovely place, but you get into a hut like this, absolutely basic, and you're happy. Why is that?"

We ate happy food. Field mushrooms for dinner.

Evening came. Max and Lisa, with the ease of two people long practised in getting comfortable in small spaces, and making the most of body warmth. curled up together on a single bunk. Miriam and I did the same. Outside it continued to snow, and that was how we survived the night, in the company of two of Antarctica's best survivalists.

Next day a stiff southerly sent more snow whirling in. We came through the pass at 900 metres our hoods up and depths of new snow creaking underfoot.



We joined with the 4WD track down the Arrow River Gorge, above heartstopping drops and past a sad cross for the driver who'd gone over the edge on these formidable chasms. We walked the old gold route, in the footsteps of 19th century miners.

They'd flicked out plum stones as they went, and now we picked the old fashioned Damson plums from laden fruit trees alongside the track. We came in to Arrowtown and the newly whitened mountains stood all about.

"The ski fields will be rubbing their hands," I said.

"No. It won't hang around," said Max, who knew something about snow and whose words anyway, when they came, repaid attention. "The ground is still warm. We need another couple of months of low-angle sun."



## #25 Arrowtown - Queenstown

*The marginal strip, the rotted bridge, the perfect town*



Lake Hayes is a mirror lake, known for its reflections and trout, a perfectly positioned lake, just a stones throw from Arrowtown. I pushed along its edge, through long grass and willow. A track had once run alongside the lake - not now.

I came up to a little bay. Boats were hauled up there and a local woman was out walking - Could I continue around the lake?

"Yes. You'll find the remains of an old track in the grass. Follow it along. You will come to the lawn of Mr Howard Paterson, sometimes called the South Island's richest man. Eggs is it? Bio-tech? Student flats? You may walk across Mr Paterson's lawn. You will then come to the lawn of Mr Jim Boulton, well-known for Shotover Jets and Baycorp. You may walk across Mr Boulton's lawn also, and that will take you through to the outlet."

I went on through the long grasses, across a park, then down through bush. I came up to a lawn. It was nicely landscaped. The willow thickets I'd pushed through were single nicely trimmed trees here and the lake edge was marked out with big flat stones. If you'd come across it unknowing, you'd have hesitated, fearing trespass, but I'd quizzed the woman. In the 1990s these properties had been





landscaped to the water's edge. Locals objected and the marginal strip was then surveyed. The survey marks remained - small stakes with yellow-painted tops. I walked across the landscaped lawn, gazing curiously up past the sloping terraces of grass and shrubs to the long horizontals of picture glass and decking that overlooked the lake. A millionaire house above a million dollar lake. I walked carefully between the stakes and the lake.

I'd talked also to DoC and the Queenstown Lakes District Council and this was the route that would become in time the pedestrian and possibly bike connector between Arrowtown and Queenstown. The route was planned to go past the old Lower Shotover Pub, and over the Shotover River on an old road bridge. That bridge was presently unsafe. I came up to it. Big red notices warned you off. It was gated and locked and wound about with barbed wire. As with barriers in general though, you simply go round them. My mission excused me, and I climbed the pediments beyond the gate.

Many of the old hardwood planks had simply rotted out, and the river slid by maybe 40 metres below. Every board was a possible shrieking trapdoor and I tested each footfall on the way across. The southern end was gated too, but the hurricane wire had simply been cut, and I squeezed through.

Then along the broad walkway that borders the Frankton Arm of Lake Wakatipu. Joggers went by, a cyclist or two, a walker or four and I sauntered a pleasant track, looking up to lakefront architecture from pole houses to posh on one side, and on the other out to the Remarkables, white with new snow.

The Frankton Walkway led onto to the Botanical Gardens and a huge and solemn memorial to Captain Robert Falcon Scott. The Antarctic hero's last diary entries of 1913 were quoted here in black text on marble. Time had gone by. Here and there the lead letters had dropped out and the text was a ghostly but still sharply defined white shadow of itself.

Other memorials mourned Queenstown heroes. Bruce Grant, said a plaque on a boulder. You achieved your life vision to stand on the summit of K2. Succumbed to the wrath of nature on descent 13 August 1995. Aged 31

Andy Harris - Mountain Guide and Friend said another plaque. During the Everest storm of May 10, 1996



Rob Hall had died refusing to abandon a less skilled climbing companion and the 31 year-old Harris, a guide with Hall's company, had been as brave - last seen returning upwards to assist others in a gathering storm, said the plaque. It was inset into a boulder, and on that slight shelf, someone had placed a single newly-picked red rose.

And there, around a corner, was Queenstown, pocket-sized and perfect. The War Memorial Arch on the waterfront. The bronze statue of founding father William Rees and his bronze dog. Lake Wakatipu. The Earnslaw's dignity upon it and the jetboat's excitement. The buskers. The street sellers of dream catchers. The petanque. The shops that sold opals, and jewellery, and sculpture and adrenaline. The cafes, the sports and camping shops, the casino. The crowds of fit youth. The steady procession of gondolas up to Bob's Peak, and the pure purple and yellow and red and green gussets of the parapenting canopies that came off the peak and hung and swung above the town. It was a tourist town cached in the mountains, entirely beautiful. It was a town that fostered its walks and bike tracks.

I met with the mayor, Clive Geddes. The Queenstown Lakes District Council, DoC and other groups had just formed a Wakatipu Community Trails Trust. The new trust would plan and finance new trails, and the route between Arrowtown and Queenstown up the side of Lake Hayes would be one of its first projects.



"I personally think it's a great idea," said Clive as we talked through Te Araroa. "It was brought up at the last Mayors Taskforce for Jobs meeting and it has a lot of support. We should look too at making it a bike route in some parts." Later also the DoC area manager Chris Eden welcomed me into his office -

"We've been waiting for you," he said.

"See that guy?" murmured Stu Dever as we stood on the wharf and the latest load of passengers filed off his launch Chinook. "Absolute dead ringer of Tony Blair."

Stu was an ex-detective. He'd spotted villains most of his life, gathered hard facts for the court cases, and now he'd cut loose - he ran his own fishing charter business, spotted the celebs and thrived on the gossip that was currency in this star-studded and miraculous part of the world.

"The police chiefs from around the world were at Millbrook recently," said Stu as we

burbled across Lake Wakatipu. "And Bill Clinton was seen there. The weekend before he'd been at Sydney. If it wasn't him it was someone very like him - the word is he's bought property near Puketapu lodge."

Queenstown's potent mix of real estate and wilderness fell away behind - almost. Stu gestured across to the foot of the Remarkables, where a new block of million dollar apartments was going in. I heard Miriam groan, and Stu said -

"Well, it's natural stone. They won't be painted bright red or anything."

Sam Neill. Michael Hill. Dick Smith came often. More New Zealanders holidayed in Queenstown now - their dollar was worth a dollar here, not 40cents or 30p. More overseas tourists - the Japanese in particular. They came out on Chinook to a world strangely silent to them -

"Excuse me," said Stu, mimicking polite bewilderment, and pointing uncertainly with his finger across the lake "but where are the other boats?"

"They just can't fathom it," said Stu, and pointed at the hills. "Excuse me. Why are there no houses? Can't fathom it. These mountains, these lakes, 900,000 people in the whole of the South Island, and what ? Ten times as many as that in Tokyo alone."



Chinook nosed up to a rudimentary wharf and Stu handed us up onto Te Araroa's next leg. DoC had asked particularly that this track be on our through route. It was a three or four day tramp, directly north-south, with good huts - the Mavora Lakes Walkway.

## The South - Section 5: Queenstown to Bluff

### #26 Mavora Lakes Walk

*The big picture, the small things*

The first part of the walk followed the Caples Greenstone track, a self-contained circuit that also linked through to the Routeburn and it was busy. We stopped often to gossip with oncoming trampers. The huts ahead were full. Choppers had brought in hunters, and their gear, and for lack of beds trampers were sleeping under the huts. We came up to Slyburn Hut and it was trumper city. Packs stood on the grass, yellow packliners pulled open, gear spilling. Wet clothes hung everywhere, boots were propped to the sun, with inners stripped out. People trekked back and forth to the loo. Smoke columned from an open fire where an Australian family sat on logs reading novels, and away in the forest I could hear the snap of dead branches from a firewood detail at work. People stirred pots on stoves, doled out food to kids, mixed the drinks. The air was crosscut by foreign accents. I began to pitch my tent.



"Hef - quick!"

Miriam came running, and I followed her back to a bush beside the hut. Two kakariki, velvet green, flew out of the bush, chattering.

Then everything stopped. Hut people came onto the porch. Camp ground people stood or sat, every head turned west, and I was witness to a ritual. People stopped for the sunset. They grouped, pointing out this and that cloud or colour that lay on the tops, or they stood alone. They watched it intensify and fluoresce, then turned away with the fading of it, and then night fell. The fire threw out a circle of soft light. People chatted about whatever. The Ngai Tahu plan for a gondola route through to Milford Sound - no way. The tumble into the Greenstone River - the English woman showed her bruises. The coloured glass of this pendant in the firelight - the Bulgarian I talked to was on his second circuit of the Greenstone Caples, making a humble living from it, threading the glass beads at every hut stop, and selling the ear-rings and necklaces, or swapping them for food. Low voices and laughter were still rising and falling as I went to bed.

Next day we went uphill amongst moss that softened every outline on the forest floor. This was the Mavora Lakes Walk and we were following the old orange W - the New Zealand Walkway symbol. We glimpsed the Greenstone River winding into distance far below. A bellbird sang -

"That's so nice."

And sang again -

"Where are you Mr Bellbird?"

No answer -

"I'm over here," chimed my wife.

We passed a bush. She brushed it with her hand in passing -

"Hebe, hebe, hebe."

I tramped on, and she was gone. It was familiar this. She'd just drop away, and I'd go back to find her studying maybe some thin hooded native orchid. She'd name it, and seek to know it. In the bush she looked and listened more acutely than anyone else I knew, stooping over every tiny plant on the path. I went back to where she'd stopped beside a mountain pine -

"It's fruiting. Look - " she'd gently teased it apart, and was studying it. "a black seed on a white fleshy foot."

A little sundew, its sticky globules shining, was next, then a birds nest fungus.

"Look. They have eggs in this little cup, but they've all blown away."

The closeup things. She looked around, charmed by it.

"Everything in its own place, doing its own thing."

"Come on Miriam."

The track wound on through a low garden of clumpy mountain pine, crossed on boulders over the gush of Pass Burn and led upward through beech forest to the saddle. We descended into tussock overlooking a small lake, passed old fencewire in the trees, and pushed along the edge of a valley through waist-high tussock. The track disappeared. The old walkway poles had long since fallen, or were hidden by tussock, and even when maybe one in five still stood proud, the faded orange band





was hard to pick in a yellow valley. The hut too was wrongly marked on the topo map, but we finally pushed through a cattleproof turntable made from an old cartwheel and Taipo hut was ours, and ours alone.

We made a brew, relaxed, spread ourselves, and I took the hut book over to my bunk. It was mid-April. Since the beginning of the year just 39 trampers had come through. The book had a Hut Code marked in bullet points - the rules by which the back country huts functioned -

- Respect for Others - be considerate of other visitors
- Fuel and Fires - where fuel is provided, use it sparingly. Replace any firewood you use with dry dead wood.

It went on through the rules for rifles, the rules for dogs, and finally someone had added, close as they could in layout and paragraphing to the other Hut Rules -

- The Universe - is neutral and unpurposeful in terms of human values and purposes. No mercy. No malice.

Out the window were clean black-rock mountains dusted with snow. Seemed like a sensible enough message, but it really got up the nose of the one who'd scrawled -

"Whatever fucknut! Have another joint you zenned out loser!"

There was tension between hunters and trampers, between jet-boaters who'd come all the way up the Mararoa River and penned their adventure into the hut book and those who overprinted the feat - Well so what that you jetboated 200 metres past the hut?



The hut book though carried the first evidences I'd seen of New Zealand-long, or South Island-long walks. In May 1999 Netherlands couple Carlyn and Leon Breda had come this far from Cape Reinga, and noted the Mavora Lakes leg - "Rivers very hard to cross after heavy rain. Quite dangerous."

In February 1998, Goetten Andreas from South Germany came through from Picton taking 80 days to Taipo Hut, and estimating another 20 to Bluff - "I saw so many beautiful places."

In February 2000 Scottish trampers Will Boyd and Denny had tramped down from Cape Reinga in a 6-month marathon - "Nearly there!"



The water pipes were iced up in the morning, the mountains all around dusted with fresh snow.

"Frozen worms," said Miriam as we set off, and stooped to touch them. "Quite soft. Just no sign of life."

We crossed the Mararoa River on a swing bridge, saw an eel, came on down the valley, splashed across steep streams, and tramped cattle country.

Closeup things. Miriam's finger traced the brief flight of a tussock moth, then pointed downward at a big dry splatter of steer shit.

"This stuff reminds me of egg cartons - "

"Really?" I paid no more attention to that. Sometimes she got it right. Sometimes she got it wrong. Simple as that. Even after every marital loyalty had been summonsed, you had to say that egg cartons was not a realistic appraisal - of anything.

We walked on. Call me the big picture man. Map in one hand, I measured our walking progress against the huge ice-planed sides of the Thomson Mountains. Map to hand, sunnies on, I squinted into snow mountains, tried to comprehend whole landscapes. Was the summit immediately west of us Mt Mavora, or simply a sub summit of this, the biggest mountain in the valley?

"It is papier mache isn't it?" said Miriam suddenly. "It's grasses, chewed up, soaked in acid, spat out the other end and left in the sun to dry."

We came out at the North Mavora Lake on the fourth day. The lake was a mirror, tawny with the reflections of mountains. We walked beside it for hours, until the farmland disappeared and we again trod soft forest paths. The day was still. The lake shone. From the forest we could look directly into it, and saw small slim shadows moving at exactly our speed, visible for minutes at a time, as they patrolled parallel to the shore, fingerling trout. They swam over shining stones, boundary riders to a roll of green underwater weed that stood out parallel to the shore, and beyond that green roll the lake fell away into



transparent depths.

The Mavora Lakes Walk came out at a road-end 25 kilometres from the nearest highway. Before leaving we'd checked to see if any shuttle service would bring a minivan into the DoC campground where the walk ends to pick up hiking parties. None would.

We'd walked 25 kilometres already that day, and were tired. I planned to walk the marginal strip on the Mararoa River down to Princhester Creek ready for the next leg through the Takitimu Mountains, but come to that - if we managed to get a ride, both of us would do it, and I'd come back and pick up my mark.

The DoC Mavora Lakes camp was almost deserted and our smiles were all the more charming in consequence. Waikato day visitors listened sympathetically to my casual mention that after a 27 kilometre tramp already that day we might have to walk all the way to Te Anau as well. They wished us luck, and drove off, waving pleasantly. I buttonholed an American couple in a hire car, but they were staying overnight to fish.

We walked on down the road towards South Mavora Lake. A 4WD vehicle was parked in a layby, the driver dressed in fatigues, leaning on the bonnet.

"Hi there. Heading back to Te Anau later I guess?"

"No," said the man. "A friend's coming in to show me mouse fishing tonight."

"Mouse fishing?"

"A mouse lure. You make them out of alkathene. We'll be fishing for the very biggest trout. They go on the silhouette at night, they go for mice, the movement in the water."

No rides, but it was here, in a roadside thicket between the North and South Mavora Lakes, that the long-ago promise of Joseph Banks at Ship Cove came true. Bellbirds - 10 or 12 of them in forest on one side of the road. Bellbirds - another six or so perched amongst the thin screen of trees at the other side of the road. A convocation of them, and busy. The birds gonged one to another non-stop. They sped swiftly from one side to another and gonged again, and kept gonging. A couple of tired trampers, transfixed on a dusty road. This was the most melodious wild music they'd ever heard.

## #27 The Takitimus: The NZ Map Grid

### *Navigation and Urination*

"And maybe bring something bright for your pack," I said to George Spearing when I rang him at Oamaru. "The hunters are out in force."

"Okay - so I don't wear my antler hat."

George was an adventurer. He'd hiked and kayaked the North Island in 1997. He'd bicycled offroad across the Nullabor. He'd tested one of Te Araroa's proposed routes in the South and waded waist-high in a flooded river to do it. He'd been in a kiwi stampede on Stewart Island - the things bouncing off his legs. And maybe, just maybe, he also knew where to find New Zealand's most sought after bottle.



We climbed to a saddle in the Takitimu Mountains and lost the trail markers soon after. Nothing but tussock and forest in front - we scanned the maps, took compass bearings on a nearby peak and felt we were on track, but stopped later. The route didn't feel right. I hadn't brought my GPS, but George produced a snappy little yellow unit, took a reading, and traced it onto the map - S5496.892, E.2118.253.

"What are those numbers?"

"New Zealand Map Grid references. It's the only accurate grid when you're using these maps. My old GPS gave only the longitude latitude readings. They'd be dead right sometimes and then you'd get a big error. I couldn't figure out what was wrong. I almost deep-sixed the thing a couple of times."

I looked at him. I remembered back to my torchlight crawl up the Lindis River and Little Breast Hill, when I'd lost faith in my own GPS - it gave readings in longitude and latitude.

"I figured it out later," said George. "The projections on nautical charts allow you to mark out latitude and longitude straight across, with a rule. That's 100% accurate. The topo maps are projected differently. They follow the earth's curvature and if you try to measure latitude from the left hand side in a straight line, the waypoints on the right hand side will be out, sometimes by close to a kilometre. A great dawning came upon me when I figured that out."

"Yeah well - I just saw the light as well George."

There was no marked trail in front. The Takitimu peaks rose to sharp summits immediately west, but we moved gradually down from mountain shoulders to the river, and followed it down.

"And how's the Spearing bottle project going?"

"I reckon I've sussed out where they buried it now, and it's not in the spot most seem to think."

It was good country for walking and talking - tussocky. We were back on track and had nothing to watch for now but the occasional bog. We had the time, and George talked through his Stewart Island project.

In 1840 after the Treaty of Waitangi signings, HMS Herald sailed south from the Bay of Islands, to further secure New Zealand's status as a British colony. The ship sailed to Stewart Island and anchored in a bay. Captain Joseph Nias wrote the anchorage bearings into the ship's log. Major Thomas Bunbury rowed ashore with his marines to claim the island for the Crown. They buried the proclamation in a bottle. Bunbury gave a description of the site - on top of a small island that became a peninsula at low tide. The ship's interpreter also drew a picture of the scene - it showed the land in profile, the ship at anchor with pennants streaming. All those clues added up to a fairly comprehensive treasure map. But all attempts to find the bottle since had failed.

George had read the literature, and the location of the island seemed clear enough - in Shipbuilders Cove. He'd booked passage to the cove by fishing boat and spent two weeks in 2000 probing with a 1.3 metre spear.

Hard work, and no luck, but he'd got a good feel for the coastline. Back home in Oamaru, he again pored over the maps and the evidences. The 1840 sketch was a good match with Shipbuilders Cove, but he'd assumed all along the anchor bearings and the sketch of Shipbuilders Cove would confirm each other. When he checked, they didn't. The bearings referenced a couple of islands that couldn't be seen from the Cove.

"I spent my early life as a seaman," said George, "and I know that a ship's log is a legal document. It will be accurate, not least on a Royal Navy Man of War."

He got a copy of the ship's original log from Australia. That gave the bearings, but also something that wasn't mentioned in the other accounts - wind direction. The 1840 sketch showed the Herald's pennants streaming aft. The ship in the sketch lay head to the wind, and the only wind that would stretch the pennants aft in that position within Shipbuilders Cove was a westerly. The log stated the wind was north east.

George had just returned from the latest summer trip - he'd taken a compass and kayaked out to the original bearings. He'd allowed for the magnetic variation that occurs over time, then paddled ashore.

"I found a new cove, with an island there that was accessible at low tide," said George.

It was a good story. An effortless kilometre or two had gone by underfoot and now we prowled the bank of Waterloo Burn, seeking a crossing where we might, by sheer speed, and the protection afforded by knee-length gaiters, get across without letting the river into our boots. We splashed across and kept on. George raised his hand, miming the next stage of his search -

"So I'm holding up the sketch, and trying to find a vantage point on this new cove where everything falls into place with the picture - "

We'd spotted and skilfully avoiding every bog except the one I'd just fallen into, waist deep. George helped me out, dripping, and we went on -

"Anyway, I found if I stood on a small beach that was uncovered at low water, I could duplicate the landscape in the sketch. There's always a bit of artistic licence, but the island was there, and the silhouette of land behind the ship was a good match.

"Not only that. If the Herald was anchored out from here head to the wind in a northeast wind, she'd have lain port side to me with her pennants flying aft - just as she was in the sketch."

"So you found the place?"

"The place, but not the bottle. I'd been camp-bound by bad weather for days by then, and I had a rendezvous with the fishing boat that day. I only had about three hours to do the search finally. Lots of flax and regrowth. Erosion too, and for all we know the bottle may have been found eons ago and unknowingly cast aside. But I'll give it another go next summer. I'd like to do some more exploring down there anyway before my slippers eventually weld to my feet."

An Otago Tramping and Mountaineering Club party was ensconced in Beckett's hut by the time we tramped in. We warmed ourselves at their fire and talked awhile, then went out and pitched our separate tents on the soft carpet of the beech forest.

The night was cold and clear, but windy. The trees stirred overhead, and then a fierce gust swept the forest. I heard it coming from far off like some catspaw ripple across a wheatfield, but enormously amplified, an approaching surf that swept closer and closer and passed overhead with a roar.

The scale of it! A little later another giant gust came through, and for a long time I lay awake, trying to pick the moment when the next bout of fierce wind began to assert itself over the sussuration of the forest, and sweep down the mountainside. Every time it came through, like that feared rogue wave in a storm, I'd hear its approach for a good 10 or 15 seconds before it passed overhead with a tremendous whoosh and faded away to the west, leaving in its wake the tinkle of dry leaves falling on the tent.

I was snug, and tired, but I could choose, pleasantly relaxed by physical effort, to sleep or not to sleep. The giant gusts came and went and I stared out through the bars of the forest at the starfield beyond. I thought to myself - I love this - and right then felt a pang of regret that soon it would be over. Later I awoke in the night to a stag roaring in the forest.

Next day we walked on. The clutch of craggy Takitimu peaks gradually fell away to one side, while on the other a darkening storm cloud kept threatening to spill over the ridge. Walking with George was fun. He'd hiked America's Pacific Crest Trail in 1991 - 4,000 kilometres. He understood.



"I'm losing a little toenail," I said at one point..

"Yep. They're usually the first to go."

"And just today for some reason. My knee is hurting with every step - a slightly pulled tendon I'd guess."

"Yeh, I had a knee strap when I was doing the Pacific Crest - it helped. The worst thing is shin splints - had that?"

"No."

"Coming down a ridge onto the Sonoran Colorado Desert. I tore those muscles and did the shuffling six inch steps all the way in to camp. For a while I thought that was the end of my tramp. I hit the Voltaren then and just willed myself to mend."

We came off conservation land and crossed onto tussock downs. It was farming country, though where the track crossed through thickets of beech, as pretty as anything on the conservation estate. He hooked up with a farm road, and followed it down. Heifers rolled their eyes, tossed their big heads and wheeled reluctantly away from our approach. We came up to a gate where twenty of the big beasts were gathered. They flung the odd look back over the shoulder as we approached, but this time the obeisance was gone. This time, you





could just see, the force was with them.

We came up and stopped. On the other side of the fence, tussling each other in a desultory kind of way were two enormous black bulls. It was a show just for the heifers who jostled at the fenceline, fascinated.

Then one of the bulls began to piss. It was a phenomenon, and I say that with little experience of bulls, but with an immediate comparison because, not to be outdone, the second bull immediately began to urinate as well, and it just wasn't in the same league.

Heifers, hikers, everyone crowded at the fence for a look. The black bull just stood there, hosing the ground underneath him. It went on and on, and it was one of those long minutes you're powerless to disturb. It was a rare vision. It was timeless. It was a kind of spell. And only my hiking companion, after we'd been watching already some 30 seconds was finally prepared to break it -

"I think," said George "He must be connected to the farm watersupply."

Later we topped a rise, and I saw in the distance a peak. I was excited by that. I knew it couldn't be any of the rounded terrain that now lay between me and the bottom of the South Island. I stopped George and pointed to the faint blue wedge on the skyline.

"I'm pretty sure that's Mt Anglem on Stewart Island."

## #28 The Longwoods Range

*Gold at the end of the rainbow.*

I'd crossed the boundary into Southland. Provincial boundaries are lines on a map but they're more than that. Southland was honest. The Ohai Country Inn didn't even offer locks or keys to its rooms. Out the window from there, Southland was beautifully trimmed with high box hedges as thick and smooth as felt. Southland was green under overcast skies, and Southland rolled. The hills rolled, the people rolled their rs.

"Just down there past the chur-r-r-ch."

That was the instruction for the the turnoff to Bluebottle Road and I walked it down. Southlanders were generous. I cut across a farm to reach Rayonier's Woodlaw Forest, and the farmer invited me to pull and chew a turnip on the way through. I followed forestry roads, then a rough fire-truck access to emerge near Otautau.

Southland was doing very well, and you could taste it on your lips as superphosphate trucks dusted the fields and drifts of it floated across on a mild wind. Romneys crowded the paddocks, forests swayed in a gentle wind, flax edgings waved alongside every road. The whole province seemed to be functioning perfectly with the occasional farmer doing no more than touch the levers.

I got to Otautau, and Miriam had booked a little flat on the main street that was once the local TAB. It was Tuesday April 16. I read the Southland Times and its extraordinarily detailed Police File. Southland did have crime. There were 24 instances listed for Invercargill in the previous week. I quote directly, including -

- A cactus plant and a broken concrete toad were taken from an Esk Street front garden between 9.45 pm on Thursday and 5.15 am on Friday
- Two Pumpkin Patch jackets (pink and purple), a pair of blue denim jeans, one green and one pink Pumpkin Patch polar fleece T-shirt and two long sleeved white T-shirts were taken from a Lothian Crescent clothesline between 3 p.m on Thursday and 9.30 am Friday.
- Two scratches made to the driver's side of a car . . . .

That was Invercargill. Gore had seven instances of crime for the week including -

- The pipe holding a Canning Street letterbox was bent over between 8pm on Sunday and 8.10 am Monday.

Then Te Anau - three criminal acts - a window gone on a Telecom phone box, three windows smashed on a shuttle bus, one hanging flower basket knocked down

overnight on Friday.

The Longwood Range rises long and low over western southland. The range is not obviously volcanic. Other South Island irruptions - the Banks or the Otago Peninsulas - retain their skeletal craters, but they're only around 12 million years old. The Longwood Range is ten times older, as smooth as a rainbow, and has a good thing buried at its foot - gold.

Otago has captured most of the South Island's old goldfield glamour, but the goldfield at Round Hill on the southern end of the Longwoods was very big, and in the 1880s supported New Zealand's biggest Chinatown - 300-odd Chinese.

The gold was alluvial - it needed sluicing. That meant high pressure water, plenty of it, and the miners looked to the Longwoods. Private entrepreneurs put up capital for water races that could bring water from 45 kilometres away. European mining companies had pushed out the Chinese goldminers by the time the main races were planned, but the Chinese dug them, timbered them, and put in the mile pegs.

I rang ahead to Robin McNeill at Invercargill, the editor of Moirs Guide to Tramping, an electrical engineer and a Southland Tramping Club stalwart. He was one of a group that planned a new Longwoods track across the summits for the views, and through the bush for the water races. He gave me advice on route -

"There's a quarry on the forestry road to Bald Hill. A old track goes in there to the Little Baldy summit. Cross the tops and drop down to Martins Hut at 137 and 258. Then follow the equal contour line . . ."

I looked at the map. It was a long way. The track markers that did exist would be old and difficult to follow. I'd changed my GPS setting to New Zealand grid reference now, and had no trouble with Robin's coordinates, but the hut was well below the bush line, with no apparent track down from the tops.

"Anyone want to come with me?" I enquired with apparent nonchalance.

We came up to the bullet-riddled sign at the base of the Little Baldy track. Unreadable distances to illegible places were stick-welded onto it, rusting away now as one with the base metal.

The Longwoods had disappeared almost as thoroughly as the sign. The cloud drifted through the trees, the bush dripped, and the track was a barely discernible crease. As I pushed through and began the climb to Little Baldy summit, my companion Arthur Williams began to whistle *Sweet Molly Malone*.

"You're set to enjoy this Arthur?"

"When you go tramping, you take what comes."

The hillside opened out finally into tussock and dwarf trees. Spot the waratah. Visibility was down to around 25 metres, there was no obvious track and the old steel markers were a good 100 metres apart. We spread out seeking that shadowy vertical in the mist that would lead us on, found it, fanned out again looking for the next one. It was easy to lose direction, but we both had compasses and I'd put in a waypoint for the Longwoods summit on my GPS. It was six kilometres away.



The way through was a labyrinth. The tussock trail was marked by waratahs, but thick clumps of flax and dwarf beech and mountain pine grew in haphazard corridors along the tops too, and it became a game, but a serious one, to find the bush markers in this maze - the single bits of old venetian blind nailed to a tree, half enclosed by moss.

There was Arthur whistling *Annie Laurie*. A souwester donned rakishly over a woolly hat. A bush shirt. Gaiters so old they were worn through in frayed holes. He'd been a trumper with the Southland Tramping Club for 25 years. He worked with wood. He worked part time as a veterinary lab technician - "Basically I study sheep shit through a microscope." And out on the Longwood tops, in zero weather, he whistled *All Around the Blooming Heather*.

We had a quick lunch and went on, breaking out into tussock again on a big undulating ridge. We lost the markers completely. I fired up the GPS again. The Longwood summit - that way. Even so, we nearly missed it, celebrating our arrival on the wrong knoll then finding the actual trig another 50 metres further on. A line of waratahs led away - shadow lines in the mist. They led away in the the wrong direction.



I hadn't gone into the Longwoods blind. Martin's Hut was close to a road-end on the Longwood's south-eastern flank, and just yesterday I'd prepared for this traverse by following an old track up past the hut towards the tops. I'd wanted to reach tussock and put in a reliable waypoint but hadn't quite made it beyond the bushline before the light closed down. I'd been forced to return without

quite getting the waypoint I wanted, but I'd gone close, and I had a reading.

Now, as we tramped away from the Longwood summit, I pulled up that second waypoint and we followed it in. The mist was right down, and for the first time I was totally dependent on the GPS. We bent east, we kept bending east and I had an uncanny certainty we were slowly completing a big anti-clockwise circle. I waited for the Longwoods trig to loom back out of the mist, waited for the pyrrhic triumph of individual instinct over the clever unit with the seven slave satellites. But then we came to the bushline.

We trawled along the bush edge, hoping to find some track marker, but the afternoon was drawing in and finally we just broke into the forest. The GPS unit was counting down distance to the waypoint. A quarter of a mile, an eighth of a mile - we were bushbashing, closing on it, but equally the forest was closing overhead, and we'd lose signal. Arthur shouted -

"I've found it."

Thirty metres on down the track was the blue plastic strap I'd tied to a tree just yesterday, and right there, as I stooped to touch it, the GPS beeped a lost signal. From then on it was all downhill. Martin's Hut was an old raceman's hut - shelter for a worker, presumably Martin, who'd maintained the water race in the old days. We arrived just before dark and slept soundly on historic hurricane wire beds softened with sacking.



The Great Wall of China - the Great Ditch of New Zealand. We tramped south, following the best defined and longest race in the Longwoods, Port's Race.

A ditch that's 1.5 metres deep, 1.2 metres wide is not in itself remarkable. But we walked an hour in the tree-pillared root-twisted New Zealand bush and the ditch was still unrolling beside us in its calm and constant dimension. It was quite something. Not just the digging of it. The race was still lined in places with timber, and totara mileposts still stood alongside the track. Not just the timber either. We came up to a smooth horseshoe tunnel that had carried the racewater right through a small hill.

One hour in, we came across a huge machine, tilted in the bush with the name *Fraser & Tinne, Phoenix Foundry, Auckland* cast in the iron. Arthur laid respectful hands on

its parts.

"Six stamper rods. This is the cam. It lifts the rods to allow them to drop under their own weight into the mortar box."

He parted ferns, and found a berdan, the rotating vessel with a iron ball crusher inside that milled quartz even finer than the stamper battery. A baker's oven, a steam boiler, the reef mine here had been run by George Printz, an ex-whaler out of Riverton, but it ran only a few years.



"The pay dirt ran out soon after Printz bought the mine" said Arthur. "There were rumours it was salted."

The track to the battery was a good one, unsigned, but well-used by locals. They came in here, but then they went back, for from here on the track was notoriously rough.

We went on. I couldn't believe it was too rough. The map showed that in the ten kilometres that lay in front, the race dropped no more than 40 metres. There'd be no ridges to climb, nor steep hills to descend. The very nature of the race, slow-flowing so as not to scour its own channel, holding to the equal contour line, promised an amiable walk.

We tramped and were soon lost again to the charm of the ditch. Bottles once bumped their way down this slow flow carrying the racemen's mail for posting at Round Hill. Opium too, by one story I'd been told, came longingly down from raceman to raceman. Perhaps you should doubt that one, but not the story of candles. Candles floating at night down through the dark intricacy of the bush - who could resist the glory of that ? Everything I knew about the Chinese told me they'd have done it.

What the map did not show, was that to stay on its contour line, the ditch and the rough path beside it wound in and out of every small crease on the





lumbering slopes of the Longwood range. It was ten kilometres? It was probably more. The hours went by with occasional brief glimpses of Southland's pea-green fields and once - the blue sea. The ditch held mildly to its course but then the track did begin to get very rough, and the light to fade. Arthur whistled *Jimmy Crack Corn*.

We went across totara slab bridges so old that grasses and a hundred tiny toadstools grew upon them. We reached the aqueducts which had carried the race over the two biggest creeks. A few trestles still stood but mostly it was wreckage and we were forced to clamber down and cast around on the far side to find the race again. Big washouts forced us away from the race, and we had to clamber out way up greasy banks, or hand our way down steep faces to get back to it.

We'd planned to bail out of the bush at a point where another old race crossed Port's. That was the legal access out, but my GPS wasn't working in the dense bush and we missed it. We kept on. Arthur was whistling *Barbara Allan*.

"Do you ever, like - enter whistling competitions or anything Arthur?"

"No. Sometimes I get told to shut up, that's all."

Twilight turned to night. Arthur switched on his headlamp, I probed along with my Maglite. The darkness increased as our lights came on, but we hardly slowed. The bush began to do its witchwood thing. Windfalls barred our path. Crisscross trees hooked us. Sedges hid the path underfoot.

"You know, when the track's this bad, Arthur it's very good to have that dark canal alongside showing us the way. A big thank you to the Chinese labourers don't you think?"

"Yes. And thank you Charles Port."

Then Arthur gave a shout and disappeared.

He was hung up on the side of the race, roped there by roots, one foot twisted up behind him, and only slowly, by anchoring myself to a tree, and extending a Leki to his outstretched hand, did we manage to tug him back onto the track.

"Into the ditch," said Arthur.

"That's a serious fall - two metres,"

"One point five metres," said Arthur, ever the historian.

We came finally to a fence alongside the track. The race swung westward now, but it was time to bail out.

We got to the square mesh of a deer fence, and hung their briefly. We were still high and way and below us, a tiny cone of light went flatlining by. The lights of Riverton glowed away to the east and closer in, we could see the highway lights at Colac Bay. I could smell the sea. In the darkness in front, a stag roared. Didn't matter, we climbed the fence.

An hour later we tumbled into the Colac Bay pub, ordered up beers, a meal and by degrees came to explain the mud, the blood, and the still more somber plan behind all of it.

"And I thought you were just a couple of people from Riverton who'd lost their marbles," said the Colac Bay pub owner Dusty Duston standing back arms folded and taking us all in. "But this is something else."



## #29 Trail's End

*Bluff: Just Te Araroa left to do . . .*

An ending had begun to fall on my South Island walk. Coming round Colac Bay toward Riverton I'd stopped to chat with a photography group out on assignment from the the Southland Institute of Technology. They'd gestured at the wide drifts of sand and stone, the surfers catching the wave. Landscape, said one guy with a Canon D60 hung round his neck. Incredible landscape, and as he'd said it I'd caught the flash of a stud in the guy's tongue. I was approaching a city.

Then at Riverton, Miriam and I had rented a waterfront crib, had looked out to see the distant sodium glow of Invercargill, and in the morning had seen Oreti Beach curving away to where Bluff Hill stood out to sea like an island.

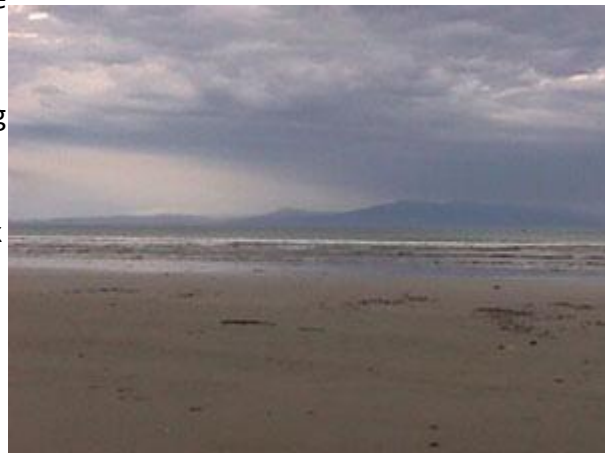
By now I'd begun to arrange the media interviews and to worry. When I'd completed the North Island walk in 1998, I remembered going straight off the trail into Kim Hill's studio. Remembered waiting my turn in the holding pattern of her interviews that morning, listening to the scientist who'd cloned a sub-Antarctic cow from Enderby Island, using somatic cell transfer techniques from the cow and semen from a dead bull and -

It was a complicated world, and I'd wondered then if I was up to it. What personal changes, Kim had asked, when I was miked and under scrutiny, had I undergone?

"I've lost my complexity. I'm more primitive."

"More - feral," she'd said.

And there it was, then and now. I walked Oreti Beach, watching the pillars of light come down on the sea, the slant of distant rain showers on Stewart Island, the subtle change of whole atmospheres. This was the walk - big and small. These were the pebbles on the beach, each with a tiny seaweed attached by a minute holdfast, each with a runnel of black sand. This was the green slipper engorged with sand. This was the shag with his round eye and webbed feet, watching me go. But how big how small - how significant was any of it?



My mind was a blank, and it occurred to me this might be the actual, final, and happy

condition of a long walk. All those long days when there'd been nothing finally but the light on the grass, the next turn, the glad hut. To walk, to eat and drink, to find shelter, to sleep. Those were the four corners of my universe.

A horseman came out of the distance, leading a second animal.

"Riding through to Invercargill?"

"Nope. Just exercising the horses for the Birchwood Hunt Club."

"The hunt club?"

"We hunt hares. We keep hounds at Ohai, and I'm the whip up front that controls the hounds for the huntsmen. Other days I do shifts at the freezing works."

Something here then that was more your own blankness. New Zealand in all its variety. Walking got you out there, opened it all up. Every day there was some amazement. But was that all?

Evening came on. I saw distant figures out for a stroll and I steered towards them. Why do we walk? It had become more urgent to know.

"It's the fresh air - it's not just the dog," said Paul. He'd recently arrived from Melbourne, to work at the Tiwai Point Aluminium smelter, he loved this wilderness on his new doorstep.

"Walking clears your head," said his companion, Lisa.

I intercepted a third tideline walker as she headed back towards her car -

"I walk because it gives me exercise," she said. "Because it means I can think, and because it's outdoors, not indoors like the gym."

"So," she said. "Why do you walk?"

"Some people walk to get away from something," I said. "They're chased by a demon. And some people walk to get some place - to reach a goal."



"So which kind of walker are you?" she said.

My mind went blank, and then the mobile phone rang, and rescued me. A single sodium light marked the turnoff from the beach, and I came in to Invercargill on the footpaths.

And so to Bluff. I walked the rail corridor where I could, and holed up in a small house on the waterfront. An old mate, James Walker, had driven down from Auckland, and picked up from a Balclutha second-hand shop a plaster of Paris model of a backpack. It was painted and detailed, a real little gem and James had engraved by pocket knife on its base my walk Cape Reinga to Bluff. Subtracting the time spent for writing internet stories, for rest and recreation and time out for jobs. I'd tramped 79 days in the North Island, 77 days in the South - 156 days to walk 2,500 kilometres.



Still, I wasn't there yet. In company with a band of friends now I picked up the trail again at the old Ocean Beach freezing works and walked around the base of Bluff Hill. Squalls buffeted us and the big waves in Foveaux Strait were churning the seabed. Up through the Glory Track's tall and elegant podocarps to the gunpit. Now I was just three kilometres from Stirling Point. I made a mark there and went back to the house to prepare a ceremonial finish.

Miriam and I drove to Invercargill that night to pick up our son Amos, and our daughter Irene who'd flown down from Auckland. Wind and rain lashed the car. The power lines were shorting and we drove an avenue that glittered either side of us with high voltage sparks.







Storm winds swept Bluff. The wind blew out the marquee that was to be the hub of the Bluff Oyster Festival. It pinned the oysterboats to their berths. Down on the waterfront it bowled the Anzac Day wreaths away from the war memorial and strewed the remembrance flowers along the shoreline.

We were a small intimate band. James hung out his washing over the heater, photocopied posters to advertise our event, and went off to paste them up. Miriam was out trying to get bread at the local shop and being told - Vogels? I don't know that one. She was off picking up a brand new Leki gifted to us by an Invercargill sports store manager Dave Butler for presentation to the mayor. I tried to write - the *Sunday Star Times* wanted a story on the walk but that was hard - the paper's Focus section deadline was Thursday and the walk didn't finish until Friday. I had underwear swinging above my head, stormwater pooling under the door, the deadline was pressing, and as usual when the pressure goes on, I couldn't find my start. Of course - poodle a construction from the best first line in New Zealand literature - Ronald Hugh Morrieson, *The Scarecrow*, out of 1963.



*"The same week our fowls were stolen, Daphne Moran had her throat cut."*

Right -

*"The day I crossed the Rangitata River, the dogs of Mesopotamia were howling at the moon."*

That was good. That was real. But I hadn't finished the actual walk yet. How did I end the story? The deadlines pressed, and I wrote -



"The Scottish piper who piped me in, the Bluff School pupils who sang for me a song of welcome, the handshake from Invercargill mayor Tim Shadbolt, were more finally than just a personal welcome."

I emailed the story off. Sank back. Had a beer. All that remained was to make the ending true. The big day dawned, the phone rang, and it was the Invercargill Pipe band manager.

"Your piper's pulled out. It's too dangerous. If the wind caught his pipes he'd be over."

I rang John Rule. He and his wife Robyn owned a big housebus, were doing a South Island tour, and we'd kept in touch during my walk. I knew he'd brought the bus into Bluff for the oyster festival and I knew he was a musician. My Scottish piper had failed - what could he do? He was Irish. He had a saxophone.

*When the Saints Come Marching In.* That was the tune, and that was John Rule who played it in a gale as I came on. I stopped before a triple line of windblown children with big eyes who sang a waiata and I loved them for it. The kids parted and I moved toward the Stirling Point signpost. About then Tim Shadbolt arrived.

"Sorry Geoff - a bit late but boy do I have problems," said Tim. "You try to organise a Bluff Oyster Festival when you can't have it in Bluff and you don't have any oysters."

I reached past Tim and gripped the sign.

"That feels just wonderful," I said and it really did.

And so my walk from Cape Reinga to Bluff ended. There was only Te Araroa left to do.

